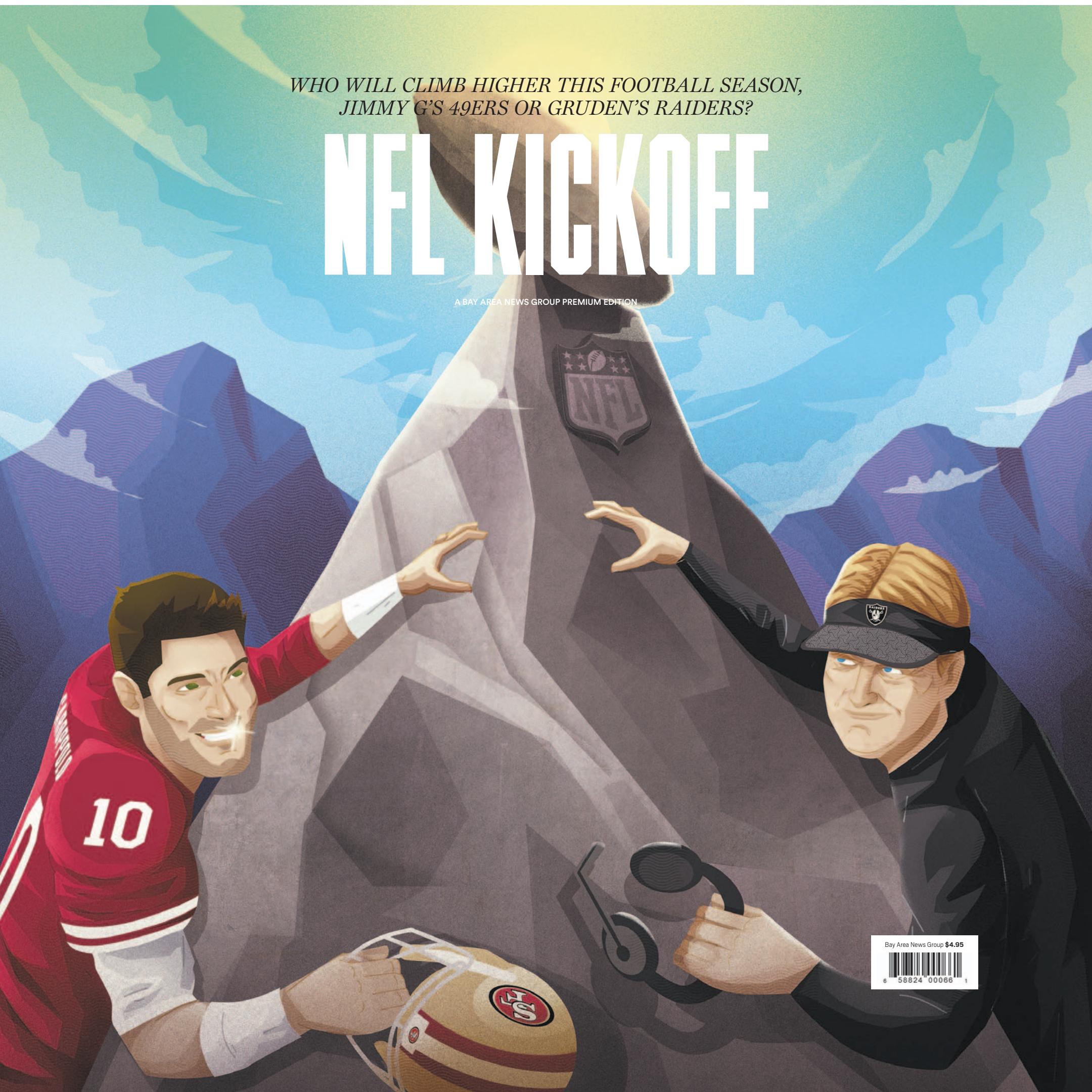


WHO WILL CLIMB HIGHER THIS FOOTBALL SEASON,
JIMMY G'S 49ERS OR GRUDEN'S RAIDERS?

NFL KICKOFF

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NFL KICKOFF



Jimmy GQ

Now that the 49ers have gone all in on Garoppolo, it's worth wondering whether this pre-anointed NFL stardom will actually work. Even Jimmy himself is intrigued to find out.

PAGE 6



Uncle Sherman

The name Richard Sherman stirs emotions in NFL circles simply by reputation alone. So when his new 49ers teammates actually got to meet the man, the pleasantly surprised expressions have yet to abate.

PAGE 16



Chucky 2.0

Jon Gruden's return to Oakland can only be put into proper perspective by watching the grainy footage of his first go-around with the Silver-and-Black. And it's pretty entertaining stuff.

PAGE 32

The good Derek?

Derek Carr really, really, really wants to show the NFL world what he's all about. With a QB guru at the helm in Gruden and an impressive crew of receivers, this has got to be his time.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BARCO

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20 questions, including 'Can we finally get past the anthem?'

BY JERRY MCDONALD

The NFL can't get out of its own way. Games can't even get to kickoff without a problem, as evidenced by a national anthem controversy that won't go away.

The Philadelphia Eagles beat the New England Patriots in one of the all-time great Super Bowls — with a backup quarterback, no less. Yet off-the-field concerns are at or near the top of the list when it comes to looking at questions, dilemmas and drama for the season to come.

So let's take a look ...

1 Who will be standing and who will be kneeling for the Star-Spangled Banner when the season begins, starting with Atlanta at Philadelphia on Sept. 6?

No way to know. Just when the whole issue seemed to be fading away, the NFL issued a clumsy, non-specific but heavy-handed directive implying there might be discipline for those who don't stand at attention. Predictably, and rightly so, the NFL Players Association got involved. Even removing presidential pressure, this should have been a no-brainer. Let it go away on its own. But the NFL stirred it back up. And here we go again.

2 Does anybody know what a legal tackle is anymore?

This will be scrutinized repeatedly in the weeks to come. There was even a contract holdout over it, with Chicago first-round pick Roquan Smith fearing the loss of guaranteed money should



Clockwise from top left: Kirk Cousins, Deshaun Watson, Andrew Luck and Carson Wentz are all players to watch this year.

he get suspended for the clear-as-mud directive about leading with the head. With any luck, we'll have zero idea what constitutes a clean tackle. Just as it is with whether a player makes a catch or not. Next up — whether a first down is truly a first down.

3 Can Philadelphia become the first team in 14 seasons to repeat as Super Bowl champion?

Probably not. The last back-to-back Super Bowl winner was New England following the 2003 and 2004 seasons. Seattle forfeited its chance to repeat after 2014 the

moment Russell Wilson threw an interception at the goal line with the Patriots ripe for the kill. The Eagles' remarkable run a year ago will be difficult to duplicate. Tom Brady's 505-yard performance in the Super Bowl provides a blueprint for how to attack the Eagles. Throw. Throw. And throw some more.

4 Will Philadelphia's insistence that Carson Wentz is its quarterback be as seamless as it seems?

For now it is. Nick Foles got a raise and managed to avoid getting traded to a bottom-feeder.

He's saying all the right things and appears to mean it. But if Wentz struggles, there's a quarterback on the roster who dominated both the NFC title game against Minnesota, then out-dueled Tom Brady. The fans notorious for booing Santa Claus will be pining for the guy who gift-wrapped a championship.

5 Which divisions have the best starting quarterbacks? (Hint, look to the NFC)

1) NFC South (Matt Ryan, Drew Brees, Cam Newton, Jameis Winston); 2) NFC West (Russell Wilson, Jared Goff, Jimmy Garoppolo, Sam Bradford-Josh Rosen); 3) NFC North (Aaron Rodgers, Matt Stafford, Kirk Cousins, Mitchell Trubisky); 4) NFC East (Carson Wentz-Nick Foles, Alex Smith, Eli Manning, Dak Prescott); 5) AFC West (Philip Rivers, Derek Carr, Case Keenum, Patrick Mahomes); 6) AFC North (Ben Roethlisberger, Joe Flacco, Andy Dalton, Tyrod Taylor-Baker Mayfield); 7) AFC South (Andrew Luck, Marcus Mariota, Deshaun Watson, Blake Bortles); 8) AFC East (Tom Brady, Josh McCown-Sam Darnold, Ryan Tannehill, AJ McCarron-Josh Allen).

6 Can Houston quarterback Deshaun Watson duplicate what he did in seven games as a rookie?

Watson was on his way to one of the NFL's most spectacular seasons by a rookie quarterback, passing for 1,699 yards and 19 touchdowns with 269 yards rushing before going down with a knee injury. Opponents have plenty of time to evaluate what he did a year ago, and chances are Watson won't be 100 percent.

The guess here is there will be a sophomore slump — at least for a time.

7 Will negotiated suspensions become the norm?

The NFL suspended Tampa Bay quarterback Jameis Winston three games for violating the personal conduct policy after an issue with a female ride-share driver. It allowed Winston to reduce the time he normally would have been suspended as well as giving him the opportunity to admit no guilt. A plea bargain, essentially. It may not be justice, but it allows both the NFL to save face and Winston plausible deniability. The NFL loves to hide its dirt. Expect more of these

8 Is Kirk Cousins a stats guy or a winning quarterback?

Cousins was supposed to be on the 49ers' radar after Kyle Shanahan had coached him with Washington. Notice how Shanahan jumped at the chance to get Jimmy Garoppolo? Playing with a Minnesota team with an excellent defense, we'll see if Cousins can lead a team, manage a game and play winning football even if his numbers aren't what they were in Washington.

9 Will Hue Jackson survive another season with the Browns?

Jackson, who was coach of the Raiders when Al Davis died, did a remarkable job with a stagnant Oakland offense. He then stepped into a Cleveland quagmire and has been roundly ridiculed for a 1-31 record. He's still there, with John Dorsey retaining him as head coach after an 0-16 season. To be fair, Jackson hasn't had a chance to be head coach for a legitimate organization.

10 Does Andrew Luck need a new home, and will he be physically able to be a top-flight quarterback even if that happens?

Luck's right shoulder may or may not be on the mend, a byproduct of an awful Colts organization that never bothered to build around the best pure quarterback talent of the last de-

cade. After New England offensive coordinator Josh McCown left the Colts at the altar, Frank Reich takes his shot to get something done and keep Luck healthy. Adding a quality guard (Quenton Nelson) in the first round of the draft is only a start.

11 How many commercials will J.J. Watt do if he returns to his three-time Defensive Player of the Year form?

The Texans' defensive end does so many good things in the community in terms of raising money, it's hard to fault the amount of air time he gets. Watt simply can't resist being front and center when a camera is around. He has had a broken leg, a herniated disk in his back, and sometimes no amount of on-camera workouts can fix a body that has been beaten up this much. Watt has played in eight of Houston's past 32 games. If he gets hurt again, we may never see the old Watt.

12 Will the running game be back in vogue?

Todd Gurley has helped transform the Rams, Leonard Fournette was a big factor in getting Jacksonville to the playoffs, and Saquon Barkley appears poised to be a major factor immediately for the New York Giants. Dallas lost Ezekiel Elliott to a suspension and missed the playoffs. Jon Gruden is in Oakland promising to get the Raiders back to smash-mouth football. Putting some offensive balance back in the NFL would be a good thing for fans of physicality.

13 Speaking of Jon Gruden, how will he operate for the Raiders the second time around?

Gruden seemed to become more and more impatient as his Tampa Bay days wound down. He has had nine years to think about how he might do things differently. So far, Gruden has seemed like the same guy in practice, and he wants success right away, but he can basically coach the Raiders as long as he wants, and the opportunity is there to build for the long term.

With any luck, we'll have zero idea what constitutes a clean tackle. Just as it is with whether a player makes a catch or not. Next up — whether a first down is truly a first down.

14 Who are the players most indispensable to their teams in 2018?

(Hint: They're almost all quarterbacks)

- 1) Green Bay QB Aaron Rodgers;
- 2) New England QB Tom Brady;
- 3) Seattle QB Russell Wilson;
- 4) Indianapolis QB Andrew Luck;
- 5) 49ers QB Jimmy Garoppolo;
- 6) Pittsburgh QB Ben Roethlisberger;
- 7) Atlanta QB Matt Ryan;
- 8) Dallas RB Ezekiel Elliott;
- 9) Detroit QB Matt Stafford;
- 10) Raiders QB Derek Carr.

15 Is Sam Darnold the answer for a Jets team that has been looking for a quarterback forever?

Darnold can benefit from a watch-and-learn period behind the agreeable Josh McCown. But it remains to be seen if the Jets can put an offensive system in place that will allow him to flourish. The position has been basically a graveyard. Even Brett Favre could only stand a year there in 2008. McCown, Ryan Fitzpatrick, Geno Smith, Mark Sanchez . . . you have to go back to weak-armed but accurate Chad Pennington to find someone who had some legit success. Broadway Sam has his work cut out for him.

16 Is top draft pick Baker Mayfield another Johnny Manziel or something more?

Something more, but it remains to be seen how much more. He plays for the Browns, after all. The edge Mayfield possesses in terms of personality is not necessarily a bad thing. He's also got a knack for dropping dimes to receivers in coverage, always an underrated part of playing quarterback in a sport that seems to covet cannon-like arms with little or no touch. A bad team is the worst place for a young quarterback, however.

17 Are the Lions philosophically opposed to the run?

Since Barry Sanders retired in 1998, Detroit has had exactly three runners gain 1,000 yards. When Reggie Bush managed to get a pedestrian 1,006 yards in 2013, they should have held

a parade. Eleven times in that span their top rusher failed to crack 700 yards. It takes 43.8 yards per game to reach 700 in a 16-game season. No wonder they're paying quarterback Matt Stafford more than \$25 million per year. Hazard pay.

18 Which five coaches are the most likely candidates for an in-season firing?

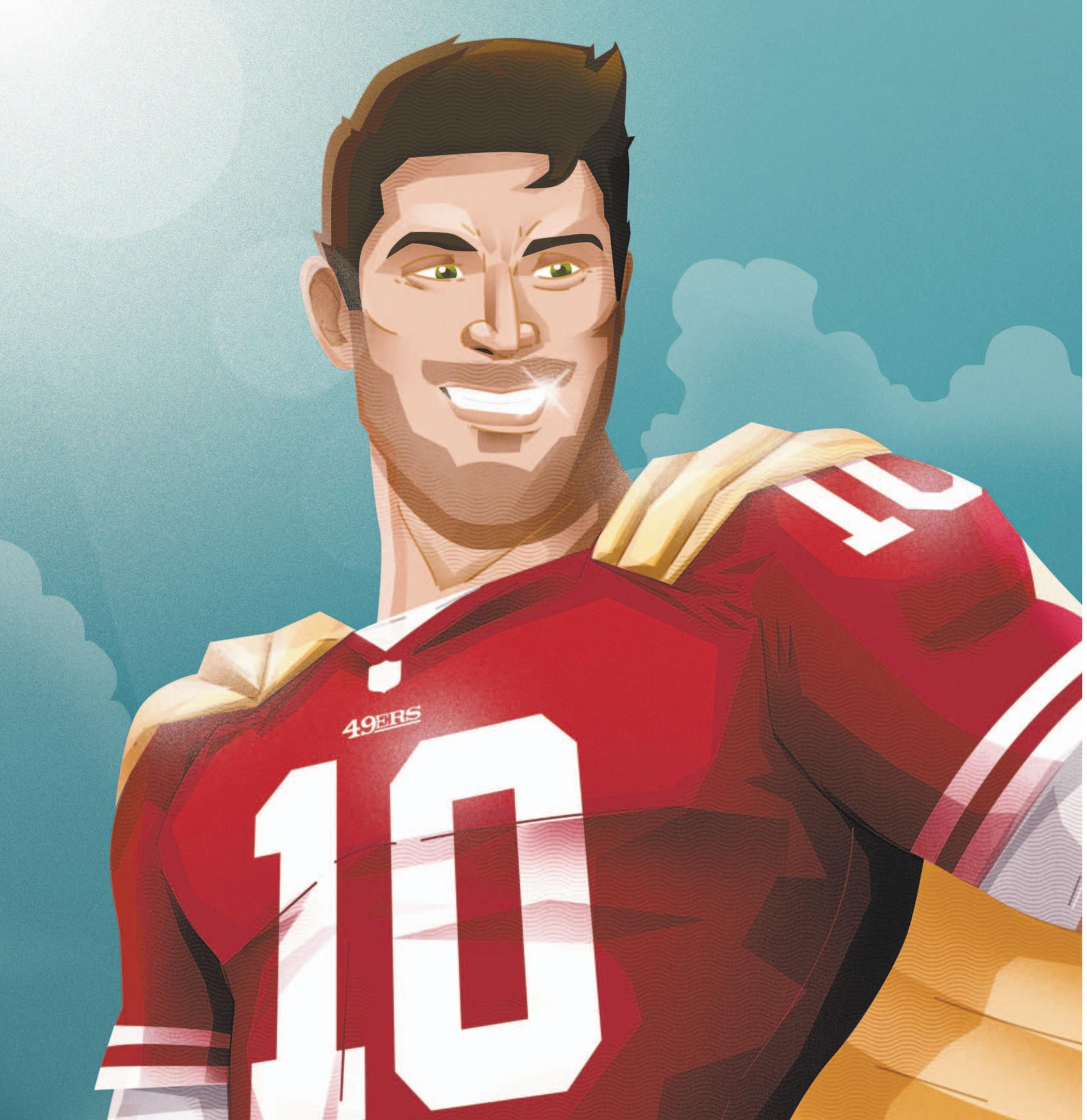
1) Dirk Koetter, Tampa Bay. Putting all your eggs in the Jameis Winston basket is a risky proposition; 2) Hue Jackson, Cleveland. He's 1-31. If he gets to 1-37, I mean, really? 3) Vance Joseph, Denver. The way the Broncos sagged last year, I'm surprised John Elway didn't make a move in the off-season; 4) Adam Gase, Miami. Man, that 10-6 season in 2016 seems like a mirage, and the porpoises are poised for another 10-loss season; 5) Marvin Lewis, Cincinnati. Even owner Mike Brown has to run out of patience some time.

19 Who are the top first-year eligible Hall of Fame candidates in 2019?

Safeties get little respect when it comes to the Hall of Fame, but Ed Reed of the Ravens could be an exception. He was a five-time All-Pro, led the NFL in interceptions three times and was an NFL defensive player of the year in 2004. His 64 career interceptions rank seventh all-time. Also getting strong consideration will be Tony Gonzalez, whose 1,325 receptions are second all-time, and his 15,127 yards rank sixth. The pass-happy era in which Gonzalez played could prevent him from being a first-ballot pick.

20 Who makes it to Super Bowl LIII in Atlanta?

The NFL remains a quarterback-driven league, and Tom Brady will be my pick to reach the Super Bowl every year until he doesn't. The guy lost last year and still added to his legacy with the way he played. Going with Green Bay in the NFC because of my respect for Aaron Rodgers. He seems too good to retire with a single ring.



WILL JIMMY GQ SAVE THE DAY?

Yes, the early signs were good — very good. But even Jimmy Garoppolo himself wants to prove he's no flash in the pan before accepting NFL superhero status. No pressure or anything.

STORY BY BY DANIEL BROWN

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BARCO



If he performs within an area code of the hype, quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo soon could be the (extremely handsome) face of the NFL.

"If he lives up to expectations, he could become the top endorser in football. He has no ceiling at this point," said sports marketing expert Bob Dorfman.

It's easy to see the appeal, unless, perhaps, you're an NFL defensive back. Garoppolo, 26, heads into his first full season as the 49ers starter with an undefeated record and the second-hand glint of the Tom Brady influence.

After coming from the New England

Patriots in a trade last season, Garoppolo went 5-0 as a starter and threw for 1,542 yards, the most ever by a quarterback in his first five starts for the 49ers.

If you think that face is everywhere now just wait until he plays, like, a full season or something.

As it stands, his brief success and toothpaste-ad smile were enough to vault him into star status. From April to mid-June, Garoppolo ranked No. 1 in jersey sales at the NFL's online shop. The only player ahead of him was rookie running back Saquon Barkley, the No. 2 overall pick of the New York Giants.

Just how wild is Garoppolo's kingdom? The San Francisco Zoo named a snow leopard "Jimmy G."

"Garoppolo has the Bay Area in the palm of his hand right now," Dorfman said. "He's extremely good-looking. He's the most eligible bachelor in the country — notwithstanding dating porn stars — and he could pretty much do anything that he wants to in terms of endorsements."

The 49ers certainly paid Garoppolo a superstar contract, forking over \$137.5 million to a player with 12 career touchdown passes and five career interceptions.

Now, they just need him to justify it. And if he does, Jimmy G will become an A-lister. While the Seattle Seahawks defense was known as the “Legion of Boom,” the 49ers offense could soon be the “Legion of Swoon.” His jawline might make it tough to tell if the vendors are hawking game programs or romance novels.

The definitive statistical database Pro-Football-Reference.com lists the quarterback's nicknames as “Jimmy GQ,” “Prince Aladdin” and “Great Garoppolo.” (Definitely not “Ickey”)

And yet Jimmy GQ is also somehow still Jimmy Gee-willikers. It's that first nickname that landed him a date with a porn star, while the second allowed the Midwest kid to defuse the ensuing controversy with an aw-shucks grin and a one-liner. Garoppolo

The 49ers signed Jimmy Garoppolo, left and below, to a \$137.5 million contract. Now, they need the quarterback to justify the signing.

called it “a learning experience,” and, voila, it was back to football questions.

“Who could say THAT'S a learning experience?” said Andy Dolich, a sports marketing consultant who has worked with the 49ers, Warriors and A's. “It was like, ‘OK, fine,’ and then it just sort of bounced off him like it was a gnat.”

Wouldn't a family-friendly corporation looking for a celebrity face have concerns about someone TMZ caught out with Kiara Mia?

“I don't think this time it will hurt him. I really don't,” said Robin Carr, a former San Francisco Giants publicist who went on to work for noted athlete endorsers including Nike, EA Sports and Kodak. “I think the way he handled it — ‘Oh, I didn't know my life

has changed' -- kind of made it a humorous situation. I think that to his credit, and to his coaching staff's credit, they definitely took a light-hearted approach.”

Still, there are two big reasons why the all-out Jimmy G marketing blitz is at least a year away.

No. 1: Jimmy Garoppolo hasn't done squat yet on the field compared to the likes of Brady, Drew Brees, Russell Wilson, Peyton Manning or any of the other NFL marketing icons.

No. 2: Jimmy Garoppolo understands No. 1 as well as anyone.

The quarterback, in conjunction with his agents and with the 49ers organization, has actively worked to keep Garoppolo from getting too famous too fast, sources said.

Yes, he's one of just five quarterbacks since the 1970 merger



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE 49ERS





JANE TYSKA — STAFF

to win his first seven NFL starts. (Garoppolo won two with the Patriots.) But the previous four quarterbacks to do it show that the train can slip off the tracks. Ben Roethlisberger and Daunte Culpepper became stars; Mike Tomczak and Dieter Brock became largely forgotten.

And Garoppolo's team record for the most passing yards over his first five starts with the 49ers? The next names in the list, in order, are Jeff Kemp, Elvis Grbac, Steve Bono and Brian Hoyer.

So you can understand why Garoppolo will take it slow with his marketing machine until he can prove he's not a flash in the pan. "With his contract from the 49ers, it's not like he has to say, 'I'd better do a nacho chip commercial or the family is in trouble,'" Dolich joked.

Instead, Garoppolo reported to training camp this summer by focusing on the blandest things possible: learning Coach Kyle Shanahan's playbook, building camaraderie with his receivers and taking every day step by step.

"I don't think he needs to seek attention. I think he gets plenty of it," Shanahan said. "So he's kind of the same guy he's always been."

"I think that's why guys like him. Guys liked him right when he got here, they liked him as he played well, and everyone knows the contract he signed this off-season. He's not going to come in and act differently. He's been the same guy each day, and I think that's why the people here really appreciate him."

When national magazines came calling for interviews, Jimmy GQ minded his p's and q's. He declined to speak to Sports Illustrated, even for a flattering and detailed story about his blue-collar career path. (Garoppolo's lone interview with a major national outlet was with Bleacher Report, which dubbed him "Superman in Disguise.")

The 49ers, meanwhile, include Garoppolo in their promotional materials, but not at the expense of other key players. Jimmy G is on banners around Levi's Stadium, but so are Marquise G, Jerick M and DeForest B.

Jimmy Garoppolo reported to training camp this summer focusing on learning the little things in Coach Kyle Shanahan's playbook, building camaraderie with his receivers and taking every day step by step.

About the only nod to Garoppolo's megawatt power is a bobblehead giveaway in the Sept. 16 home opener. (Note to readers: It is not life-sized).

Garoppolo did sign some endorsement deals, such as with Bose noise-canceling headphones and with the New Era Cap Company. But Dorfman, the Bay Area-based marketing expert who tracks these kind of things, said while top-end football endorsers tend to make \$12 million to \$13 million a year in endorsement deals, Garoppolo will be around \$1 million for 2018. (The quarterback's camp would neither confirm nor deny that estimate).

He could make more, Dorfman said, but it's clear the quarterback wants to build his football resume first.

"I get the feeling that that's what his camp has been instructing him to do. I think that's what he wants to do," said Dorfman, an executive at Baker Street Advertising in San Francisco. "You're not seeing him all over the place now in terms of marketing. He certainly could have gone that way. He could almost be the face of the league at this point, if he really wanted to."

"But I think he's focusing on performing on the field. He may be taking a page out of Brady's book, which is more about being one of the guys and less about being a superstar in media."

Until then, Garoppolo works. Because, crazy as it sounds, he was trapped in a brutal situation last season. As a midseason acquisition, he had time to memorize the plays but not to learn them. Garoppolo hadn't drilled them in practice, on those quiet afternoons in April and August. He hadn't had time to master every route of every play.

"Last year was so difficult because you're preparing for a defense that you're learning in a week, but at the same time, you're learning brand new calls, new verbiage, all that stuff," Garoppolo said.

"Being able to start this year from the ground up means I can

learn the 'whys' of the offense. How does it all tie together? How does one play help dictate the next play? It will just make more sense."

Then again, Garoppolo's challenging learning curve is not how tight end Garrett Celek remembers things.

"As soon as Jimmy came in, he just took control right away," Celek said. "He didn't ease into it at all. It was pretty awesome. He owned the role. We always say, in our offense, 'You have to overcome coaching.' And he's really good at helping receivers overcome coaching."

That phrase "overcome coaching" was one of the buzzy phrases of camp. It's a misleading motto that, in truth, means to be coached so well that players understand how to adjust on the fly if a play breaks down or if an unexpected defensive alignment opens up a new opportunity.

On that front, it's hard to imagine how much Garoppolo could improve when it comes to improvisation. He had the highest completion rate in the NFL when under pressure last season, according to Pro Football Focus. The 49ers passer hit on 62.3 percent of such throws to rank ahead of the Minnesota Vikings' Case Keenum (55.7 percent), Brady (55.5 percent) and the New Orleans Saints' Drew Brees (54.4).

"Jimmy has learned a lot from Brady," Celek said. "He knows, 'Hey, you don't have to do exactly what they tell us to do. Get open. Get the ball. Let's make plays.'"

The Brady comparison is a frequent one, and not by accident. Even before he spent three-plus seasons backing up the three-time league MVP, Garoppolo emulated Brady's throwing style. His personal quarterbacks coach in high school, Jeff Christensen, would show him videos of Brady's rapid-fire release and perfect footwork and say, essentially, "Do it like this."

The Brady influence is so profound that a video clip surfaced

in April of Garoppolo echoing his mentor's pet phrases on the field. The 18-second clip juxtaposed Brady's in-game patter with Garoppolo saying the same things to his 49ers teammates: "Have a day! ... Let's make them pay ... Need a good drive. ... What are we doing, man? ... Let's go!"

The clip racked up more than 237,000 views, including a click from a certain native of Arlington Heights, Illinois.

"I did see that. It kind of creeped me out," Garoppolo said sheepishly. "I don't know. We were always kind of similar. Obviously, I picked up some stuff from him."

But this training camp, Garoppolo went out of his way to mimic a wildly different brand of Hall of Famer. He said he occasionally experimented with different arm angles, mimicking Brett Favre, one of the greatest improvisers of all-time.

"Oh, yeah, I kind of work on it. It's kind of fun to work on those weird throws," Garoppolo said. "I've always heard Brett Favre did it when he played, and he had some of the craziest angles that you'll ever see. When you get into a game, you never know how you have to throw it."

Whatever the method, it worked. From Weeks 13-17 last season, when Garoppolo was the 49ers' full-time starter, only two NFL quarterbacks racked up more passing yardage than his 1,542. Philip Rivers of the Los Angeles Chargers threw for 1,567, and Jameis Winston of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers threw for 1,584.

Now, along with learning nuances of the playbook, Garoppolo is learning more about his new weapons. The 49ers splurged on Jerick McKinnon for four years and \$30 million (\$18 million guaranteed) in part to give Garoppolo someone with reliable hands out of the backfield.

McKinnon had 51 catches for 421 yards last year — and a 75 percent catch rate, according to Pro-Football-Reference. After a few days of trying to stop him

Garoppolo pumps his fist after leading the 49ers to a win against the Tennessee Titans, last December, he hopes to extend that winning formula into the 2018 season.

in practice, 49ers defensive coordinator Robert Saleh said of McKinnon: "You're almost looking at another wide receiver on the football field. A wide receiver who can carry the ball and carry it with power."

Garoppolo also will get his first chance to work with Pierre Garcon, the 49ers' lone accomplished receiver, because the veteran was out for the season with a neck injury by the time Garoppolo took over for C.J. Beathard.

To get a head start with these players, Garoppolo led informal workout sessions with his receivers at San Jose State in the spring. McKinnon and Garcon were among the attendees.

"It kind of gets us away from the coaches and everything," Garoppolo said. "And it allows me to talk to the receivers about specific things, or the tight ends or running backs. ... It was just to be on the same page with those guys, talking through route concepts and how they see it versus how I see it. It just gets us on the same page."

Garoppolo's days of being isolated from coaches — or from anybody — are over for the foreseeable future. He will be under the microscope from Sept. 9, when the Garoppolo Era begins in earnest with his Week 1 game against the Minnesota Vikings.

And if he can somehow extend the season into January, getting the 49ers back into the playoffs, he can expect representatives from Gatorade, Nike, Esquire, Tiger Beat and Pepsodent camped out on his front lawn.

Dolich, who knew Dwight Clark well, noted that Garoppolo is on the precipice of stardom just as Clark's passing makes fans nostalgic for the time when so many of the glory-days 49ers were larger than life. There's a yearning for a new wave of stars.

Carr, the consultant and longtime sports PR ace, also sees the connection.

"Dwight Clark was stunningly handsome, too," she said. "(Garoppolo) is good-looking. He's very welcoming. He's non-threatening. He's one of those guys where women love him, kids love him, and guys will like him."

"But he's going to really answer everything with how he plays on the field."

Carr paused.

"So far, so good," she added.

NHAT V. MEYER — STAFF





Should we believe the hype?

Well, yes and no. Jimmy G is great and all, but a playoff-caliber NFL squad will need more than just a handsome, strong-armed QB to get 'er done

There's a lot of hype surrounding the 49ers heading into the 2018 season. That's to be expected when one of North America's great franchises rediscovers its relevance behind the talismanic play of a young, handsome quarterback.

Given the way the 49ers ended last season — 5-0 with Jimmy Garoppolo at the helm of the offense — it would be strange if there wasn't hype around this team.

At the beginning of August — well after training camps started — the sports betting media company Action Network listed the 49ers with 16-1 odds to win the Super Bowl.

Just for reference, those are better odds than the Atlanta Falcons, New Orleans Saints, Jacksonville Jaguars and Los Angeles Chargers.

The hype is real, but hype doesn't win football games.

So even as excitement reaches a fever pitch for the 49ers in 2018, it still begs the question: Is Kyle Shanahan's team a contender?

The answer: a resounding maybe.

There are reasons to believe in this team — the excitement around it is not baseless — but the hype does need to be toned down a bit as we head into the 2018 season.

For instance: I wouldn't take those aforementioned odds on the 49ers taking a trip to Atlanta in February.

That said, 49ers fans should be excited about Garoppolo. This is a quarterback who revitalized a



Dieter
Kurtenbach

Fans should be excited that coach Kyle Shanahan, right, had an offseason to work with quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo.

PHOTO BY
CHRISTIAN PETERSEN —
GETTY IMAGES

franchise with his five-game, season-ending winning streak — that can't possibly be ignored.

And fans should be excited that he and Shanahan just finished an offseason together. They should be on the same page with the offensive ideology, allowing them to dive a bit deeper into the playbook.

I once heard that NFL football is a game where an oddly-shaped ball bounces around for 60 minutes, and the best passing team wins.

With Garoppolo and Shanahan at the helm, you can bet that the 49ers are going to be able to move the ball through the air.

You should be excited about the teams' free-agent signings, too. On offense, Weston Richburg and Jerick McKinnon should make big impacts in their first year in red and gold.

The middle of the 49ers' offensive line was a sieve last year — Richburg, one of the best centers in the NFL, should eliminate that problem. Meanwhile, McKinnon is a near-perfect running back for Shanahan's zone-blocking-heavy offense — he's a one-cut-and-go guy with elite speed and tremendous skills in the passing game.

Add the fact that Marquise Goodwin — one of the fastest people on the planet — seems to be even faster, and with George Kittle showing all the signs that he could be a breakout player, and you have something engaging happening on the offensive side of the ball in Santa Clara.

The defense is worth excitement, too: Richard Sherman is mentoring a young and talented

secondary in the dark arts of the Cover 3 system, Adrian Colbert and Jaquiski Tartt are putting out Earl Thomas and Kam Chancellor vibes, DeForest Buckner is poised to be an All-Pro, and the linebacker corps — led by Reuben Foster, Malcolm Smith and impressive rookie Fred Warner — is fast and hard-hitting.

Yes, there's a lot to grab onto if you're a 49ers optimist.

So where does all of this talent put San Francisco?

8-8.

And that's not bad. It's an improvement over last year!

Why 8-8?

Because despite the tremendous upside on both sides of the ball, depth still looks to be a serious issue with this team. Yes, it's better than it was last year, but San Francisco has a long way to go before it's a Super Bowl contender.

There's also the issue of the pass rush — the 49ers are likely to have a hard time pressuring the quarterback from the edge in 2018, and in today's NFL, that's the name of the game on defense.

Add in a division that's not as tough as it was last year but is still pretty difficult, all things considered, and a tough schedule to open the season (at Minnesota, at Kansas City, at the Chargers and at Green Bay in the first six weeks), and the notion of a division title starts to dissipate.

A few injuries and you can see the push for double-digit wins fall away, too.

Don't forget, this team was 1-10 before Garoppolo took over as the starting quarterback. A quarter-

back can't cover up all that stink.

Beyond that, no one can be 100 percent sure of what kind of player Garoppolo will be in 2018. I am in the front pew of the tent when it comes to Garoppolo believers, but just as you can't ignore that end-of-season winning streak, you can't pretend that Garoppolo didn't take a lot of risks with his passes last year. Nearly 6 percent of his throws were interceptable, which put him in the same category as Jacksonville's Blake Bortles (who is objectively terrible).

Perhaps those risky throws were a byproduct of a bad offensive line in front of him, mediocre talent around him and an unfamiliarity with the system he was running.

Maybe those were unforced errors that will continue in 2018.

We just don't know.

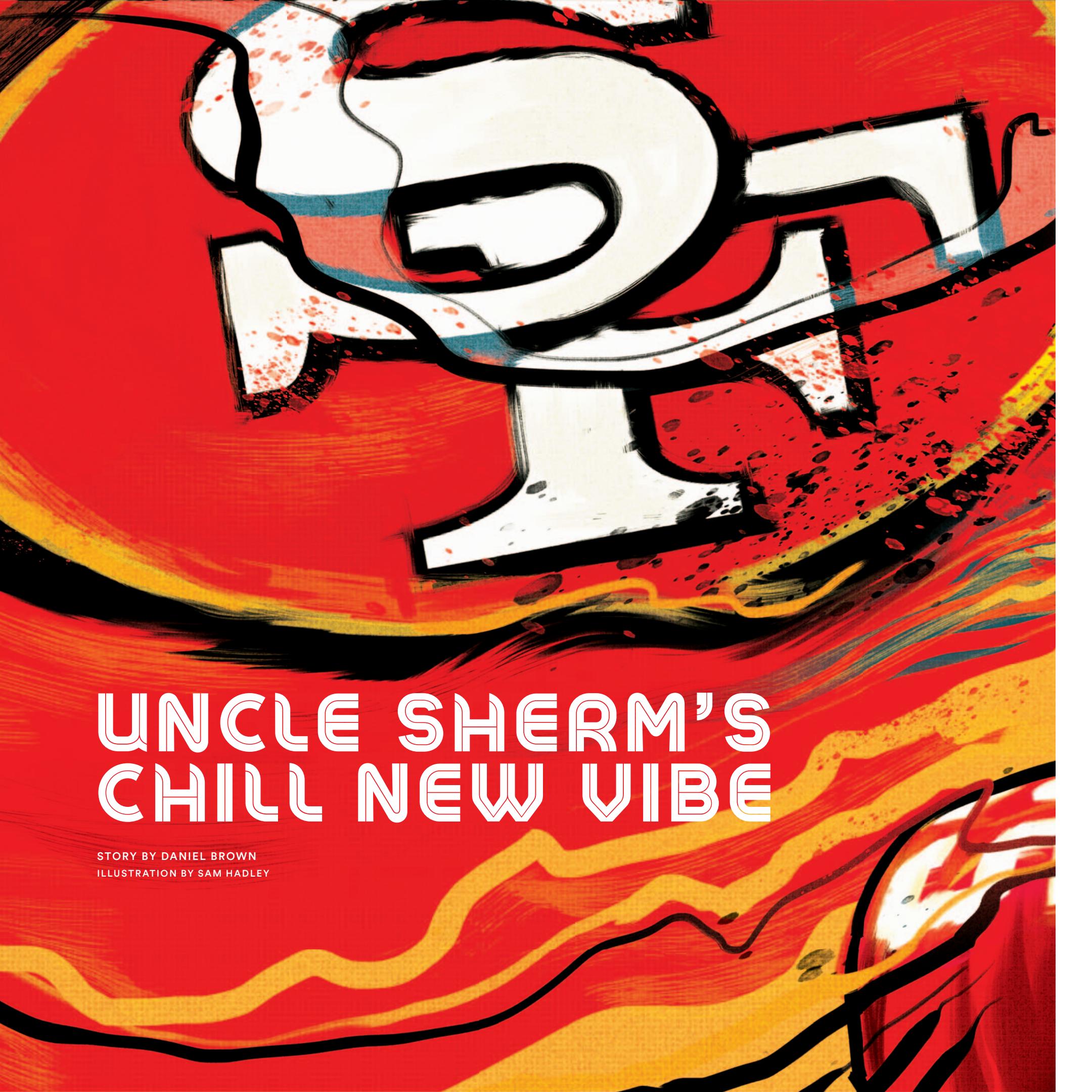
And that's a big part of these 8-8 Niners.

But take solace in the fact that, while these Niners might appear to be a team on the rise in the macro, and middle-of-the-pack in the micro, that nothing ever works out the way one expects. A few of those bounces can go one way, and the eight-win Niners suddenly have 10. The other way, and the Niners are perhaps treading water at six wins.

A year ago today, such an advantageous position would have been borderline unfathomable. Now, a .500 season would be viewed as a disappointment.

It's truly incredible what a competent (how competent we're about to find out) quarterback can do for a team.





UNCLE SHERM'S CHILL NEW VIBE

STORY BY DANIEL BROWN
ILLUSTRATION BY SAM HADLEY



Thus far former 49ers nemesis Richard Sherman has proved to be everything his new teammates didn't expect. Even as he mends his Achilles, his effect on a young defense and team has been immeasurable.

Not long after the 49ers signed Richard Sherman as a free agent, the cornerback also landed a moonlighting gig as a travel writer.

The booking app HotelTonight put up Sherman and his wife, Ashley Moss, in various swanky San Francisco accommodations and asked him to write online reviews. The three-time first-team All-Pro, while using an impossibly clever username ("Richard S."), clearly savored his new Bay Area landscape.

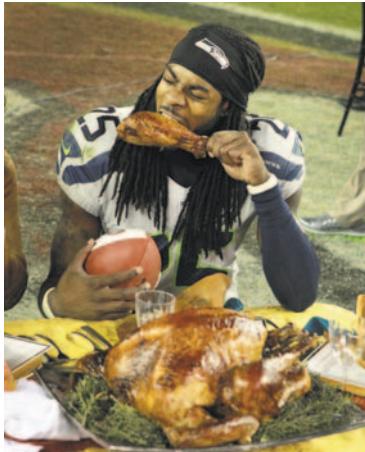
Of the Fairmont Hotel, Sherman wrote: "The first thing we did was throw on those plush robes and order champagne (it came in under 30 min) so we could sit on the balcony and take in the insane views of the bay."

Of the Proper Hotel: "The decor is super fun and the rooftop bar has a cool scene. Definitely a hip/hipster vibe in an up-and-coming neighborhood."

Of the Hotel Zeppelin: "Since the hotel is in Union Square, this was a good spot to explore the iconic tourist spots or shop. The rooms are a bit small for a football player but it's a cool hotel."

Sherman never got around to reviewing the Super 8, but he can share insights about the Super Bowl (he's won one, lost one). The Four Seasons? This will be his eighth. As for the Holiday Inn, the former Seattle Seahawks once spent a traveling holiday eating Thanksgiving dinner at the 50-yard line of Levi's Stadium.

As it turns out, his football job and his travel job have much in common. Because Sherman, 30, had lots of down time during



Richard Sherman, not known to be shy, once enjoyed a holiday feast on the 50-yard line after his former team beat the 49ers at Levi's Stadium in 2014.

training camp as he eased his way back from a career-threatening ruptured Achilles, he served as a football tour guide for the 49ers young defensive backs.

Sherman also shared inside tips with receivers, quarterbacks, and anyone else willing to listen. Sherman took so many players under his guidance so quickly that around camp, Richard S. became known as "Uncle Sherm."

He's been funny at his news conferences, too, cutting off a reporter who asked Sherman how an old guy like him might be able to help the young guys.

"Old? Why you gotta put it like that?" Sherman said. "It's *veteran*."

His low-key charm surprised many of the 49ers, especially considering Sherman's earned reputation as a pain in the neck. But he proved to be an astonish-





ingly gracious host — the maître d' of the defense.

"When he's lined up against you in a different jersey, he does seem loud and brash and you start thinking, 'I can't wait to shut this guy up,'" 49ers fullback Kyle Juszczyk said. "It's absolutely not the case when he's on your team. I think he's incredibly intelligent. He's very genuine. He does a great job of bringing other people along."

Left tackle Joe Staley, who knew Sherman only from their ferocious battles with Seattle for NFC West supremacy, said: "I thought he was going to be annoying, like he was annoying to me when he was in a Seahawks uniform. But he's been nothing but great. We're happy to have him in the red and gold."

AMONG THE ELITE

Ultimately, the 49ers, and Sherman himself, want him to get back to annoying the daylights out of opposing receivers. His career is at a crossroads, but at last check he still ranked among the NFL's elite defensive backs. Over the nine games he played last season, the catch rate allowed against him was 46.3 percent, which ranked fourth in the league according to Pro Football Focus. That's in line with his career mark of 47.7 percent since entering the league in 2011, the best in the NFL during that span.

"With Sherm, you can tell he knows exactly what he's doing and why he's been the best corner in the league forever," rookie receiver Dante Pettis said after lining up a few times against him in practice. "Going against him was exciting. You get to watch

Once a rival, now a Niner. Richard Sherman used to be a thorn in the 49ers' side. But now he's "been nothing but great. We're happy to have him in the red and gold," says new teammate Joe Staley.

this dude destroy wide receivers for a few years then you get to go against him everyday in practice."

In an increasingly wide-open passing league, Sherman hasn't allowed 100 yards in coverage since Week 4 of 2012, according to Pro Football Focus. That was 88 games ago. So when asked about his goals for this season, he did not exactly lower the bar.

"When I go out there, I expect to dominate. I expect to perform at a high level," Sherman said. "I expect to make my stops, to play my technique, to be where I'm supposed to be when I'm supposed to be there. Outside of that, I expect to be a great teammate and to encourage my young guys when I'm not practicing."

NON-COMBUSTIBLE?

For a player who spent much of his career being mad at somebody for something, he's been remarkably chill around the Santa Clara facility. In previous years, Sherman's had dustups with Tom Brady ("You mad bro?"), Michael Crabtree ("A sorry receiver"), his one-time Stanford coach Jim Harbaugh ("I don't deal with him") and former Washington receiver, and new 49ers teammate, Pierre Garcon ("Pierre doesn't matter in this league," he said in 2014).

Sherman even tussled with his old employers on his way out of Seattle. After signing a three-year deal with the 49ers worth \$27.15 million, according to Pro Football Talk, the corner scolded Seahawks fans on Twitter: "Instead of getting upset with me for going to a new team, how about you get upset with the people who forced me to go? If one job fires you and another job offers you a great position, I highly doubt most people would go back to the old job for a lot less money."

Garrett Celek, the 49ers tight end, wondered how such a combustible personality was going to mesh with what has become a tight-knit group.

"When I found out we first signed him, it was like, 'Oh, that's

going to be kind of weird in the locker room,'" Celek said. "But he gelled with us right away and has become one of the leaders of the team. He mixed it up with everybody right off the bat. No one had any problem with him."

About the only thing that doesn't tick Sherman off, though, is the injury that leaves his future in doubt. During a Week 10 game with the Arizona Cardinals last season, the cornerback got tangled up with receiver John Brown late in the third quarter of a 22-16 win.

He grasped his ankle immediately, already knowing the worst, but Sherman made a point of getting up and limping to the sideline. That's how his career in Seattle ended.

You mad, bro?

Hardly.

"It was a great time for everything to happen," Sherman said early in camp. "It was one of those things where I felt like it needed to happen and it helped me, at this point in my career, to take another step and find another level."

Sherman said the injury allowed him to spend time at home with his two young kids, Rayden, 3, and Avery, 2. He turned his rehab into a family bonding experience. Avery brought him ice and rubbed his legs. Rayden marveled once his dad started running again. "My son says, 'Daddy, you look so fast!'" Sherman said.

A NEW START

Devastating as the injury was, Sherman said it offered the cleansing effect of a new start. He began his career as an underestimated defender, the 154th player taken overall in 2011. Sherman made a career out of proving people wrong and heads into this season as the active leader with 32 interceptions, comfortably ahead of the Raiders' Reggie Nelson (23) and Eric Weddle of the Baltimore Ravens (23).

He is also the active leader in passes defensed with 99, just ahead of 92 each by Brent Grimes





of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers and Johnathan Joseph of the Houston Texans. It's a syndrome his new neighbors, the Warriors, might understand: Greatness got monotonous.

"I'm not saying people get complacent, but you get bored. It's a routine," Sherman said. "You go out there, you play 16 games, you play at a high level, you do your best, you go against these guys and you enjoy it. But sometimes throwing a wrench in the plans helps you. It wakes you up. It reignites your fire. It takes you back to where you need to be, and I think that's what I needed and that's what I appreciated."

So the day after Sherman's injury, he embarked on a new mission. He called his friend, Lakers star Kobe Bryant, who came back from an Achilles tear at age 34. Bryant gave him more than a mere pep talk, instead laying out a detailed and urgent itinerary for Sherman to get going right away.

"He gave me some things to do early on in the process to make sure that I expedited the healing process," the cornerback said. "I was more proactive than reactive. I think that was one of the big things. If you just sit there and just let your foot sit in the cast and let your muscles atrophy, you're going to have a longer road to recovery."

Against the odds, Sherman was on the field for the start of training camp in late July. But the comeback was hardly complete. In his first padded 1-on-1 drill since the injury, receiver Marquise Goodwin treated the shutdown corner like a turnstile, blasting pass him for long gain. A few days later, Sherman required a week of rest because of a hamstring strain.

Still, he continued to make his presence felt. On the practice field, you could see him giving instruction to players and talking through good plays and bad. If Sherman had had a whistle and a clipboard, he would have looked just like a defensive coordinator. He even sounded the part when

asked about cornerback Ahkello Witherspoon.

"Ahkello's been great. He's incredibly receptive and a bright young man," Sherman said. "He's very coachable. If you tell him to do something once, he's going to grasp it and be able to master it or do everything he can to master it in the next couple of days."

Sherman is even getting along with his old sparring partner now that he and Garcon are teammates. Back in that memorable tussle, on Oct. 7, 2014, a frustrated Garcon tried to throw Sherman to the ground by the facemask. Another time, Garcon tried to yank him down by the hair.

Now, they are BFFS (Best Forty-Niners Forever) and even had lockers next to each other during training camp. The receiver now calls Sherman "a good guy."

"In the locker room," Garcon said, "we're all friends."

Sherman has also had in-depth conversations with Jimmy Garoppolo as the quarterback prepares for his first full season as the starter. They talk about different routes and coverages, with Sherman telling the QB what to be on alert for from a defensive perspective. ("We talked about different passes, people he likes to take on dates ..." Sherman quipped.)

A MENTOR

Most tellingly, he's also made a point of mentoring wayward linebacker Reuben Foster. The only thing standing between the second-year player and stardom is his early penchant for trouble. The 49ers will start the season without Foster, suspending him without pay for the first two games of the regular season for violating the NFL's Conduct and Substances of Abuse policies.

Sherman's locker was right next to Foster's in training camp.

"I've had many conversations with him," Sherman said. "I think he's going to have a great year. Obviously, there have been some mistakes. There have been some ups and downs of this offseason

and last year. But he's a human being, and human beings make mistakes.

"I think Reuben is moving forward and trying to be a better man. Sometimes you don't know what you don't know. And as you know better, you do better. I think that's going to be the case with him."

In all, Sherman's been just the kind of veteran a team needs as they start knocking on the door to relevancy. The 49ers finished 6-10 last season and ranked 24th in total defense. Only five teams had fewer than the 49ers' 10 interceptions.

Now, along comes Sherman, who in Seattle was the leader of the NFL's most consistently dominant defense and appears intent on whipping the 49ers secondary into the same kind of shape.

"I've seen a lot of growth with that group. With Richard Sherman it's more than what he brings to the table. It's what he means to these other guys," Juszczyk said. "I've seen them look to him for so much. They're always working on extra things and it's showing up on the field now. Guys are making plays. There's a lot of confidence there."

So Sherman enters 2018 with a new team, new challenges and new skeptics. Presumably, there will be new feuds, too. (The 49ers face the Seahawks in Seattle on Dec. 2 and at Levi's Stadium on Dec. 16).

Sherman vows to be ready. And if his Achilles recovers enough to let him thrive at left cornerback again, he might want to warn receivers with a sign from one of those fancy San Francisco hotels.

Do Not Disturb.

Sherman, left, made a career out of proving people wrong and heads into this season as the active leader with 32 interceptions, comfortably ahead of the Raiders' Reggie Nelson (23) and Eric Weddle of the Baltimore Ravens (23).



STORY BY CAM INMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY JEFF DURHAM

To truly size up the 49ers' locker room chemistry, let's get

astrological

Hey, man, what's your sign? If there's one 49er who might ask, it's Ahkello Witherspoon, a second-year cornerback and, more pertinent, an Aries.

"Ahkello is huge into that," quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo said. "He's talked to me about it. All I know is, I'm a Scorpio, and that's about it."

Witherspoon brought up his astrology passion when asked this spring how he has meshed with his longtime idol and 49ers newcomer Richard Sherman.

"It's been very natural. I attribute it to him being a fellow Aries," Witherspoon said. "We understand each other on a different level."

Andrea Mallis agrees. She is a sports astrologer and runs Virgo in Service Astrological Consulting.

"Same zodiac signs have the ease and unique compatibility of seeing their qualities mirrored back," Mallis said. "Aries is a cardinal fire sign. They are the pioneers of the zodiac, enthusiastic, exuberant, headstrong, daring, courageous, competitive, forceful, fearless."

Aries are also plentiful on the Niners, with linebacker Reuben Foster among the eight on the

90-man roster as training camp began.

The most popular zodiac signs: Aquarius (11 players), then Capricorn and Libra with 10 apiece. Coach Kyle Shanahan (Dec. 14) is a Sagittarius, and general manager John Lynch (Sept. 25) is a Libra.

"I'm not a, what do you call it, a horoscopologist?" Witherspoon said.

Actually, that'd be an astrologist. Witherspoon's day job is a cornerback, one who has spent years studying Sherman, the 49ers' former rival as a Seahawk. "I looked up to him the way he approached the game with a very intellectual passion," Witherspoon said.

Did he worship him enough as a Sacramento teenager to have a Sherman poster on his bedroom wall? "No, that's anti-Aries of me," Witherspoon replied. "Aries

is humble and chill."

Garoppolo also comes across as chill, even though he is "an intense Scorpio," as Mallis put it. So is wide receiver Marquise Goodwin, and it's no surprise they've connected sharing the same sign.

"You encourage each other to achieve your dreams, and Jimmy Garoppolo frequently points out new avenues and grander vistas for Marquise Goodwin's talents and energy," Mallis said. "Jimmy calls him Quise, and it's clear they have a special Scorpio telepathy."

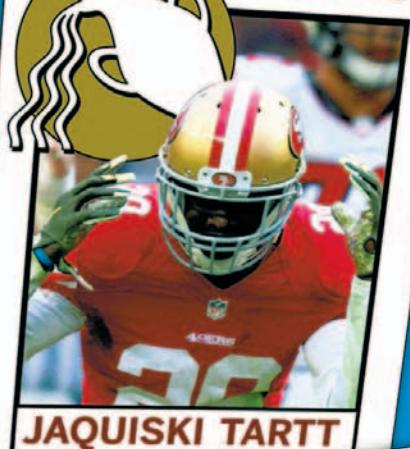
So how will Garoppolo work with new running back Jerick McKinnon, who is one of a team-low four Taurus?

"Scorpio is an intense fixed water sign, powerful, magnetic, mysterious, complex," Mallis said of Garoppolo's zodiac sign. "Opposites attract, and Taurus Jerick McKinnon is a fixed earth sign, persistent, enduring, determined, reliable, productive, and resourceful."

Garoppolo's trade became official Oct. 31, a date that falls in the Scorpio cycle, and that wasn't lost on Mallis, who said: "Transformation is the name of the game for Scorpio, and Jimmy G clearly transformed the 49ers in his 5-0 debut. Game Changer!"

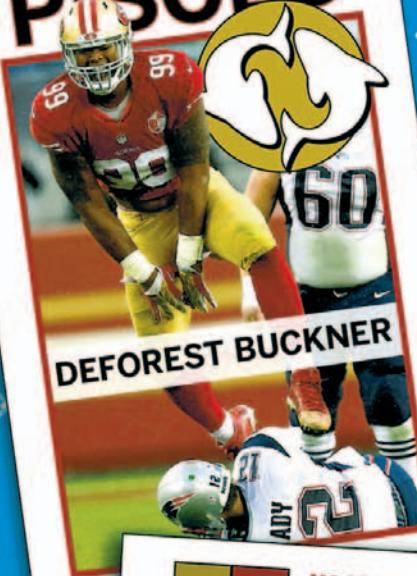
PHOTOS BY JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO, KARL MONDON, NHAT V. MEYER, JANE TYSKA — STAFF; GETTY IMAGES; ASSOCIATED PRESS; SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

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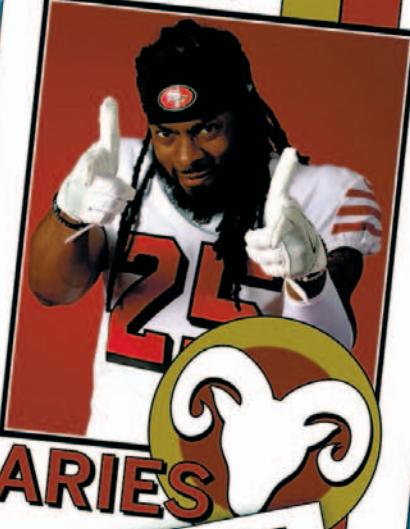
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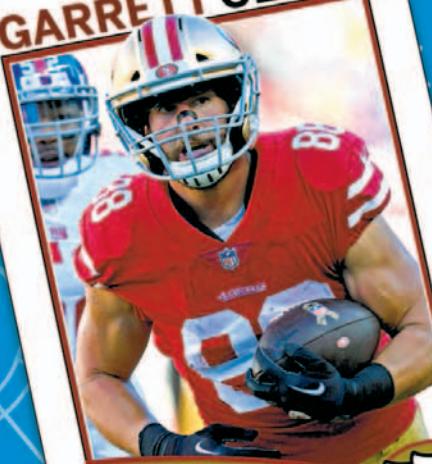
DEFOREST BUCKNER

RICHARD SHERMAN



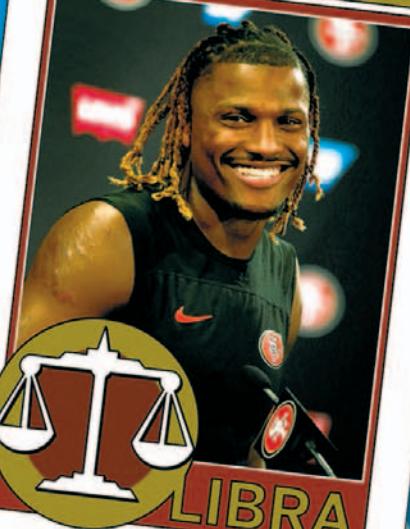
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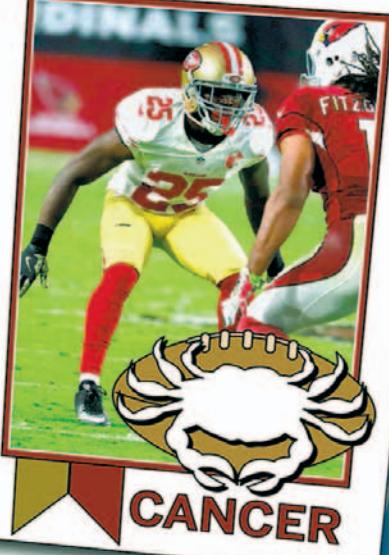
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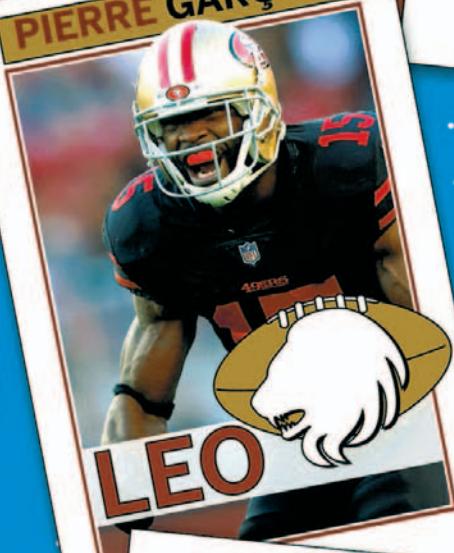
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JIMMIE WARD



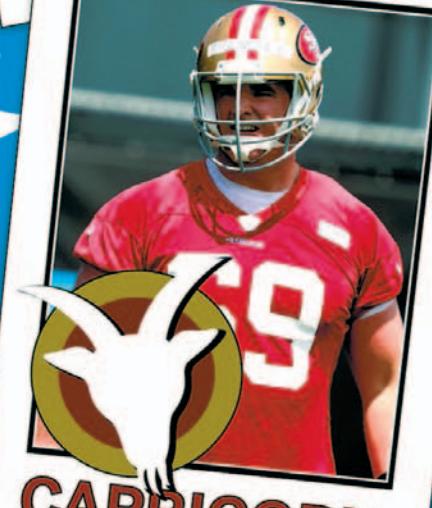
CANCER

PIERRE GARÇON



LEO

MIKE MCGLINCHY



CAPRICORN

ROBBIE GOULD



SAGITTARIUS

BIG THINGS AHEAD



PEOPLE HAVE TOLD JERICK MCKINNON HE'S TOO SMALL EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. GOOD THING FOR HIM, AND THE 49ERS, HE WAS NEVER ONE TO LISTEN.

BY CAM INMAN

Jerick McKinnon joins the 49ers this season not only as their starting running back but a big-time receiving threat as well. Luckily for quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo, he also knows how vital pass protection will be in his job description.

After four seasons as mostly a backup with the Minnesota Vikings, McKinnon joined the 49ers, agreeing to a four-year, \$30 million contract.

We thought we should sit down and get to know the new guy a bit, so we did.

McKinnon talked about overcoming the perception of being a little guy in a big man's sport, how the weight room helped eliminate that doubt and his anticipation of a meetup with a 49ers back who did the type of things he does very well himself: Roger Craig.

So you grew up in Marietta, about 15 minutes north of Atlanta. What other sports did you play?

"I ran track in high school. I played baseball a long time. I played shortstop, left field, center field. I hit leadoff. I was stealing bases."

Did you think you'd become a stolen-base king and become a baseball player instead of football?

"I was real good in baseball. I didn't really have the love for it like football. Football is a lot of excitement. It's an adrenaline rush. That's what kept me drawn to it."

When did you start playing tackle football?

"At 4, in Pop Warner. You're not really getting hit hard. You're just tripping over yourself at that point. When does it start getting real? Like 7."

Do you remember the name of your first team?

"East Cobb Vikings."

When you went to middle school, you transferred after sixth grade because you weren't getting playing time?

"I went to Marietta Middle, and in sixth grade I was on the seventh-grade team. They wouldn't

let me play running back. They said I was too small. My dad and the coach had a little talk, and it was basically, 'Well, we have somebody else that plays running back that's bigger.' You know how you've got those kids that are just way bigger in advance? We had like two or three of them, and I was small so they put me at receiver. Yeah, my dad and the coach had a talk."

Us dads do that for our children.

"Yeah, we were trying to get a scholarship at the time, and that didn't work out, because he said I was too small and wouldn't play me because he said I was going to get hurt. Then I moved."

When you decided to focus solely on football in high school, did you map it out that you'd go to college and NFL teams will come looking?

"It was more, 'I'm putting all my chips into football. I'm going to find a way to get a scholarship somewhere.' I really wanted to play big-time football. But then the same thing came up: I was too small. My coach always said, 'If you play football, they're going to find you, no matter what level.' I was fortunate enough to get a full-ride scholarship to prestigious Georgia Southern University, home of me and Matt Breida. I went there for four years and loved it."

How big were you coming out of high school?

"Same height: 5-9. I've been the same height for a long time. I've never really been tall. I was 5-5 for a good minute. I probably hit 5-9 my junior year."

You've worked on your body in other ways.

"Yeah, so after I hurt my hip that (freshman) spring, running sprints, I missed that spring of football so I had to do rehab. After that, that's when I started falling in love with the weight room. I didn't have anything else to do. I had a weightlifting class with one of my coaches, and I could only do upper body. I just guess

it was my outlet for frustration. That's where I'd spend most of my time, in the weight room. Then I started to gain love for it."

Your weightlifting at the combine (32 reps, a record for runnings backs) was impressive.

"The weight room was a way where I could come alive, where size didn't always matter. I used it as that. Once I started falling in love with that, I wanted to see how much stronger I could get every year."

Are you the strongest you've ever been?

"I don't know. I feel pretty strong."

Are you the strongest running back in the NFL?

"Yeah, I'll challenge whoever. I'll take myself over whoever. For me, it's about being smart, because I did get hurt my first year in the weight room. It's about smart but at the same time maximizing my reps."

Did you scout out the 49ers by checking with Breida?

"Nah, I just went for it. I knew Coach Shanahan and the offense he was running. That's all I needed to know. It was a perfect opportunity."

Did you buy a house here or rent?

"I rented one. I'm buying a home in Atlanta, for a lot cheaper."

What about for your parents?

"I paid off their house. That's the first thing I did, right after the season, actually."

That's not the same house you moved to in middle school is it?

"It is. So I did that. Then I got cars. But that's it. That's the only thing I've spent money on. I don't have kids or a wife."

How did that make you feel, paying off your parents' home? We saw that this summer with Marquise (Goodwin).

"It feels like everything is coming full circle. As a young kid, you talk to your parents about



THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF THE 49ERS; OPPOSITE PAGE: JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO — STAFF

that stuff. It's a dream. You don't really know if it's going to happen. But you know your vision of that, and only you can control that. For that to come full circle, it's a lot of right decision-making, and a lot of hard work. For me to do that for my people, it's definitely something I've dreamt about my whole life. I can't thank God enough for putting me in a position to do that."

What do your parents do? Are they retired?

"My mom (Frances) is a contract administrator, and my dad (Rungie) is an environmental inspector and does architecture on the side."

Do they worry about you being so far from home?

"Probably my mom. My dad, he's chill and is a cool cat. He speaks some wisdom. I'm a baby boy and have an older brother. She's like, 'I'll move to California if you need me to.' My dad, that's my dawg. Me and him talk every day, like text throughout the day and FaceTime him at night."

I'm guessing you were a pretty easy son to raise. You don't seem like a guy who got in trouble?

"No, I just wanted to make it to the League. That's the only dream I had."

Was your highlight of being in the NFL the Minneapolis Miracle (the Vikings' play-off-clinching win over New Orleans last season)?

"Yeah, that was a good one. That (stuff) was crazy. Everybody asks me about it, and it's hard to explain."

You were in the backfield helping block, right, and knew the ball wasn't coming to you?

"Yeah. I was just watching once the ball was thrown. I had the best seat in the house. I was thinking maybe we'd catch it, get out of bounds, get a chance at a field goal. We practiced the play every day in walk-through, and the day before the game. There's rarely times we have to run the play. Then we did the play. He

threw it, I saw him jump, I was like good catch. But when (the defender) missed, and he kept his balance, I was like, 'Oh (my).' I saw him running and was, 'We just won the game. We just won the game.' It still didn't hit me until like two days later. That was probably the biggest play of my career, and I didn't even make the play."

But you had a touchdown in that game, right?

"Yeah."

You're going to have a lot more this year?

"A lot more. I'm expecting big things."

Yeah, I've been hyping you up too much.

"Too much?"

Yeah, I say the way this offense is set up and the way you look, the numbers could be big. Do you know anything about Roger Craig and the numbers he put up?

"Yeah. He did 1,000/1,000."

Correct. So you know. I'm not putting that on you, because...

"Yeah, I'm not a guy that speaks numbers. I don't want to put a ceiling on what I can do. I just want to do the most I can for the team."

So did you know that (about Craig) before you got here?

"Yeah. That's old school, though. I've been looking at all those backs. Marshall Faulk, Curtis Martin. I started looking at a real lot of Marshall Faulk when I came into the league. Roger Craig, my brother told me about him years ago. That's the type of back I'm looking for, because I like to catch the ball and run the ball. I don't consider myself just a running back."

And pass protect?

"Yeah, pass protect. That's the No. 1 (job). That's what's going to keep you around. Everyone can run. Some people can catch. But not everyone can pass protect."

Have you met Roger Craig yet?

"No, but I know it's coming."

49ers plot lines

BY CAM INMAN



WHAT WILL BE GAROPPOLO'S ENCORE?

Going 5-0 in his December debut as the 49ers' starting quarterback, Jimmy Garoppolo pocketed a long-term contract (five years, \$137.5 million) and immediate playoff aspirations. He's spent all year studying Kyle Shanahan's complex offense, but is his mind too cluttered now?

CAN JERICK MCKINNON PAY OFF?

Another high-priced investment comes in the 5-foot-9 frame of Jerick McKinnon, whose rushing and receiving ability should produce huge stats, similar to Devonta Freeman under Kyle Shanahan with the 2016-17 Falcons. Niners fans would prefer McKinnon channel Roger Craig circa 1985 (1,050 rushing yards; 1,016 receiving).

CAN RICHARD SHERMAN COME BACK?

After seven years tormenting the 49ers as the Seattle Seahawks' All-Pro cornerback, Sherman found refuge behind enemy lines. If he can rebound from November's right Achilles tear (and a training camp hamstring strain), the 49ers have found a steal to play left cornerback and lead a young defense.

Reuben Foster will return from suspension in Week 3. Will he continue to throw himself around with reckless abandon?

WILL DEFOREST BUCKNER BE A STAR?

Year 3 could be DeForest Buckner's coming-out party for a league that has ignored him from a Pro Bowl and All-Pro standpoint. He already has proved to be a dominant, reliable force who could merit a \$100 million-plus contract next offseason.

REUBEN FOSTER'S RETURN

Linebacker Reuben Foster will be coming off a two-game suspension when the 49ers visit Kansas City in Week 3. Will we see the Foster who threw his body around with reckless abandon as an injury-plagued rookie who still racked up the 49ers' second-most tackles? Or will he follow coaches' orders to use his hands more and shoulders less?

SUBPLOTS FOR MONDAY MORNING QBs

Home-field advantage

Year 5 of Levi's Stadium should bear the 49ers' first home winning record (2014: 4-4; 2015: 4-4; 2016: 1-7; 2017: 3-5). Of the eight opponents this season, five have new coaches, and only the Rams went to the playoffs.

Paid up

Almost every starter is working on a contract or extension signed since 2017, and the most underpaid one is Buckner, whose rookie contract can't be extended until after the season. In contract years: Jimmie Ward, Eli Harold, Robbie Gould, Bradley Pinion.

Suspensions

Foster is suspended the first two games after his tumultuous offseason that included a domestic-violence charges he was exonerated from but also weapons and drug-possession charges. Also out two games is receiver/returner Victor Bolden for violating the performance-enhancing drug policy.

Schedule at a glance

BY CAM INMAN

SEPT. 9

at Minnesota Vikings (10 a.m., FOX)

Running back Jerick McKinnon returns to where he launched his NFL career the past four seasons. Oh, there's also that Kirk Cousins/Jimmy Garoppolo/Kyle Shanahan love-triangle storyline.

SEPT. 16

vs. Detroit Lions (1:05 p.m., FOX)

This is the Lions' first visit to Levi's Stadium. They lost their final 12 trips to Candlestick Park, dating to 1977.

SEPT. 23

at Kansas City Chiefs (10 a.m., FOX)

Patrick Mahomes, Alex Smith's replacement, has the arm strength to test the 49ers' secondary.

SEPT. 30

at Los Angeles Chargers (1:25 p.m., CBS)

Time to visit the Chargers' temporary home, the StubHub Center, and face Anthony Lynn, the first coach the 49ers interviewed last year before hiring Kyle Shanahan.

BIGGEST GAMES

Sept. 9 at Minnesota

As much as QBs Kirk Cousins and Jimmy Garoppolo will attract attention, don't forget about the defenses, especially the Vikings'.

Oct. 15 at Green Bay

A visit to Lambeau Field and Aaron Rodgers marks the 49ers' fourth road trip in six games to open the season.

Nov. 1 vs. Raiders

Leaving-For-Las-Vegas Raiders visit the 49ers on "Thursday Night Football" – assuming they make kickoff in time after an I-880 commute.

Dec. 2 at Seattle

The rebuilt Seahawks will have had three months to find their groove under Pete Carroll.

OCT. 7

vs. Arizona Cardinals (1:25 p.m., FOX)

The 49ers haven't beaten the Cardinals since the 2014 season finale, and this meeting offers a quality shot at ending that six-game streak.

OCT. 15

at Green Bay Packers (5:15 p.m., ESPN)

Ah, "Monday Night Football" in the fall at Lambeau Field. Last time the 49ers were there, they won a January 2014, sub-zero playoff game with a former NFL quarterback named Colin Kaepernick.

OCT. 21

vs. Los Angeles Rams (5:20 p.m., NBC)

Holding serve at home is a vital step in the 49ers' path to unseat the Rams atop the NFC West.

OCT. 28

at Arizona Cardinals (1:25 p.m., FOX)

New coach Steve Wilks and new quarterback Sam Bradford host the 49ers, who lost 18-15 in overtime last season at Arizona in Week 4.

NOV. 1

vs. Raiders (5:20 p.m., FOX, NFLN)

This will be Levi's Stadium's one and only "Battle of the Bay" before the Raiders flee for Las Vegas in 2020. After this, the 49ers break for their bye.

NOV. 12

vs. New York Giants (5:15 p.m., ESPN)

The 49ers snapped their 0-9 start and beat the Giants 31-21 last Nov. 12 at Levi's Stadium. What is this, an anniversary special? Can Eli Manning win this time with new coach Pat Shurmur?

BYE

NOV. 25

at Tampa Bay Buccaneers (10 a.m., FOX)

Kyle Shanahan got his NFL coaching start in Tampa as Jon Gruden's quality control coach in 2004-05, a tenure that proved instrumental in not only drawing up Gruden's thick playbook but also in teaching him defensive nuances, too.

DEC. 2

at Seattle Seahawks (5:20 p.m., NBC)

Richard Sherman's return will hog the spotlight as the 49ers seek their first win in Seattle since 2011. The Seahawks have won the past nine meetings.

DEC. 9

vs. Denver Broncos (1:05 p.m., CBS)

The Broncos have 10 of 22 starters left from when they won Super Bowl 50 at Levi's Stadium in February 2016. (Memo to Jimmy Garoppolo: Von Miller is one of them.)

DEC. 16

vs. Seattle Seahawks (1:05 p.m., FOX)

Russell Wilson is 4-0 at Levi's Stadium. The 49ers' all-time starters there: Colin Kaepernick 6-11, Blaine Gabbert 3-4, Brian Hoyer 0-2, C.J. Beathard 1-3 and Jimmy Garoppolo 2-0.

DEC. 23

vs. Chicago Bears (1:05 p.m., FOX)

Garoppolo won his 49ers starting debut 15-14 at Chicago on Dec. 3, and this encore effort will come at Levi's Stadium.

DEC. 30

at Los Angeles Rams (1:25 p.m., FOX)

This is the second straight season these NFC West rivals close the regular season at the Coliseum, where the 49ers are 2-0 since the Rams returned to Los Angeles. In fact, the 49ers haven't lost a Southern California visit to the Rams since 1986, winning their last eight meetings in Anaheim.

Players to watch

BY CAM INMAN



PLAYERS WITH BREAKOUT POTENTIAL

RB Jerick McKinnon

His rushing and receiving ability play perfectly into Kyle Shanahan's system, so look for him to challenge his four-year TD total (12) as a Vikings reserve.

FS Adrian Colbert

His fearless physicality and ball-hawking ways secured him the free safety spot as a surprise rookie, and now he needs his first interception and many more.

CB Ahkello Witherspoon

He morphed from an inactive rookie into a bona fide starter last season, and business should pick up with Richard Sherman's presence on the other side.

TE George Kittle

A 43-catch rookie season showed his capabilities, and more is expected from him (specifically more than 2 TDs) if injuries don't hinder him again.

Breakout candidate tight end George Kittle should up his TD total from last season (2).

OTHER KEY PLAYERS

C Weston Richburg

The former New York Giants starter must quickly develop chemistry with Jimmy Garoppolo, make defensive checks and bring his nastier, stronger vibe to the line.

WR Marquise Goodwin

Last year's breakout season (962 yards) has him poised to become Garoppolo's No. 1 target. He has proved to be more versatile than just a downfield threat.

ON THE HOT SEAT

Arik Armstead

The 49ers have just six career sacks from their 2015 top draft pick, who has missed 18 of the past 24 games with shoulder and hand injuries. A hamstring strain at the start of training camp hindered his switch from edge rusher to the "big end" position.

Malcolm Smith

After missing all of last season (torn pectoral), Smith reported to camp with a heel injury, and if injuries persist, Brock Coyle or Fred Warner are coming for his linebacker job.

Pierre Garçon

He was on pace for 1,000 yards last season as the 49ers' No. 1 receiver before suffering a neck injury. At 32, he's one of the NFL's 10 oldest active receivers.

POSITIONS OF CONCERN

Edge rusher

A year after pushing Armstead out as the "Leo" pass-rusher, Solomon Thomas is to get a shot, even though he'll also slide inside to his natural spot. DeForest Buckner could dominate from the edge in the dime defense. Cassius Marsh brings speed.

Offensive line

The 49ers hope to have upgraded a few spots on their offensive line, and it could take time to see how the new unit meshes, particularly with the additions of Richburg and right tackle Mike McGlinchey. Their task: merely protect Garoppolo and open holes for McKinnon.

Cornerback corps

Richard Sherman's health should dictate whether the cornerback group has improved. Otherwise, the 49ers are gambling on Witherspoon's growth, Jimmie Ward's versatility and the untapped potential of Tarvarius Moore, Greg Mabin, Tyvis Powell and Tarvarus McFadden.

Projected roster

No.	Pos.	Ht.	Wt.	Age	Exp. College
3	C.J. Beathard	QB	6-2	215	24
5	Bradley Pinion	P	6-5	240	24
9	Robbie Gould	K	6-0	190	35
10	Jimmy Garoppolo	QB	6-2	225	26
11	Marquise Goodwin	WR	5-9	180	27
15	Pierre Garçon	WR	6-0	211	32
18	Dante Pettis	WR	6-1	195	22
20	Jimmie Ward	DB	5-11	193	27
22	Matt Breida	RB	5-11	190	23
23	Akhello Witherspoon	CB	6-3	195	23
24	K'Waun Williams	CB	5-9	185	27
25	Richard Sherman	CB	6-3	195	30
26	Greg Mabin	DB	6-2	200	24
27	Adrian Colbert	DB	6-2	205	24
28	Jerick McKinnon	RB	5-9	205	26
29	Jaquiski Tartt	S	6-1	215	26
31	Raheem Mostert	RB	5-10	197	26
36	Alfred Morris	RB	5-10	222	29
40	D.J. Reed Jr.	CB	5-9	188	21
43	Chancellor James	S	6-2	208	23
44	Kyle Juszczyk	FB	6-1	240	27
45	Tarvarius Moore	DB	6-2	200	21
48	Fred Warner	LB	6-3	236	21
50	Brock Coyle	LB	6-1	245	27
51	Malcolm Smith	LB	6-0	225	29
53	Mark Nzeocha	LB	6-3	240	28
54	Cassius Marsh	DL	6-4	245	26
57	Eli Harold	LB	6-3	257	24
58	Weston Richburg	C/G	6-4	290	27
62	Erik Magnuson	OL	6-6	305	24
64	Jonathan Cooper	G	6-2	308	28
65	Joshua Garnett	G	6-5	305	24
68	Mike Person	OL	6-4	300	30
69	Mike McGlinchey	T	6-8	315	23
74	Joe Staley	T	6-5	295	33
75	Laken Tomlinson	OL	6-3	312	26
76	Garry Gilliam	OL	6-5	305	27
77	Jullian Taylor	DT	6-5	280	23
81	Trent Taylor	WR	5-8	180	24
82	Richie James Jr.	WR	5-9	185	22
83	Cole Hikutini	TE	6-4	247	24
84	Kendrick Bourne	WR	6-1	203	23
85	George Kittle	TE	6-4	250	24
86	Kyle Nelson	LS	6-2	240	31
88	Garrett Celek	TE	6-5	252	30
90	Earl Mitchell	NT	6-3	310	30
91	Arik Armstead	DL	6-7	292	24
92	Jeremiah Attaochu	DL	6-3	252	25
93	D.J. Jones	DL	6-0	321	23
94	Solomon Thomas	DL	6-3	280	22
96	Sheldon Day	DL	6-1	294	24
97	Dekoda Watson	LB	6-2	245	30
99	DeForest Buckner*	DL	6-7	300	24
56	Reuben Foster	LB	6-1	228	24
17	Victor Bolden Jr.**	WR	5-8	178	23
6	Terrell Williams Jr.***	S	6-4	212	22
95	Kentavious Street	DL	6-2	287	22

* Suspended ** Injured reserve: *** Non-Football Injury List

Who will stand atop the NFC West standings?

1. LOS ANGELES RAMS

(Last year: 11-5, first place)

How will defensive additions Ndamukong Suh, Aqib Talib and Marcus Peters — each with a suspension in their history — impact the Rams? Former Cal quarterback Jared Goff and running back Todd Gurley flourished a year ago upon coach Sean McVay's arrival. They lost their playoff opener to the Falcons after a backup-oriented lineup fell to the 49ers in the regular-season finale.

2. SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

(6-10, fourth place)

3. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

(9-7, second place)

So many 49ers rivals have left Seattle: Richard Sherman, Michael Bennett, Cliff Avril and Kam Chancellor. Pete Carroll's offseason also included overhauling his coaching staff and dealing with Earl Thomas' contract holdout. Can running backs Rashaad Penny (first-round pick) and Chris Carson take the offensive pressure off Russell Wilson and Doug Baldwin?

4. ARIZONA CARDINALS

(8-8, third place)

Steve Wilks replaces Bruce Arians as coach, and at some point, he'll have top pick Josh Rosen replace Sam Bradford at quarterback. Star running back David Johnson returns from a 2017 wrist injury. But safety Tyrann Mathieu got jettisoned, center A.Q. Shipley tore an ACL, and GM Steve Keim got disciplined for a July 4 DUI arrest.

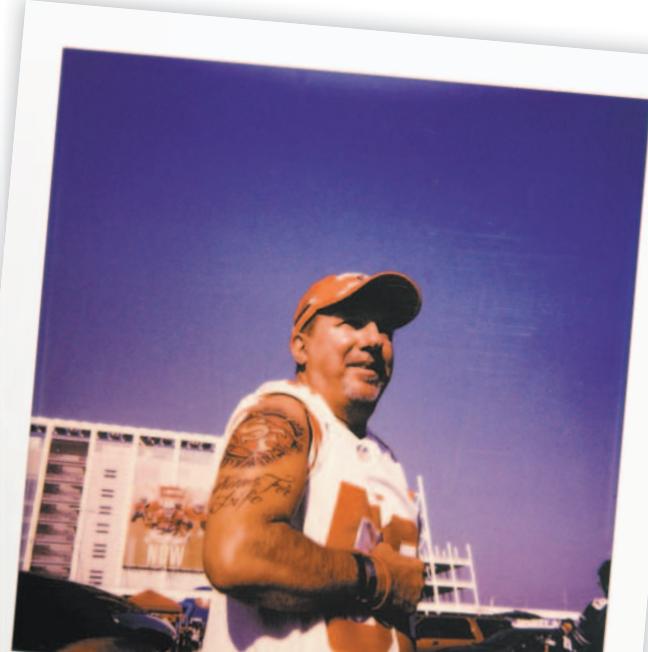
THE 49ERS

#Ready4Some FOOTBALL

THE SIGHTS OF LIVE NFL FOOTBALL, EVEN AT AN EXHIBITION GAME IN AUGUST, INSPIRE. SOMETIMES THEY EVEN INSPIRE YOU TO GRAB THE OLD-SCHOOL POLAROID CAMERA FOR NOSTALGIC EFFECT, AS WAS THE CASE FOR OUR RANDY VASQUEZ. WE INVITE YOU TO POST YOUR OWN FAVORITE GAME-DAY SNAPS ON INSTAGRAM AND TAG US — WE'RE [@MERCNEWS](#) & [@49ERS.CAM](#). THEN WE'LL REGRAM THE BEST OF THE BEST!



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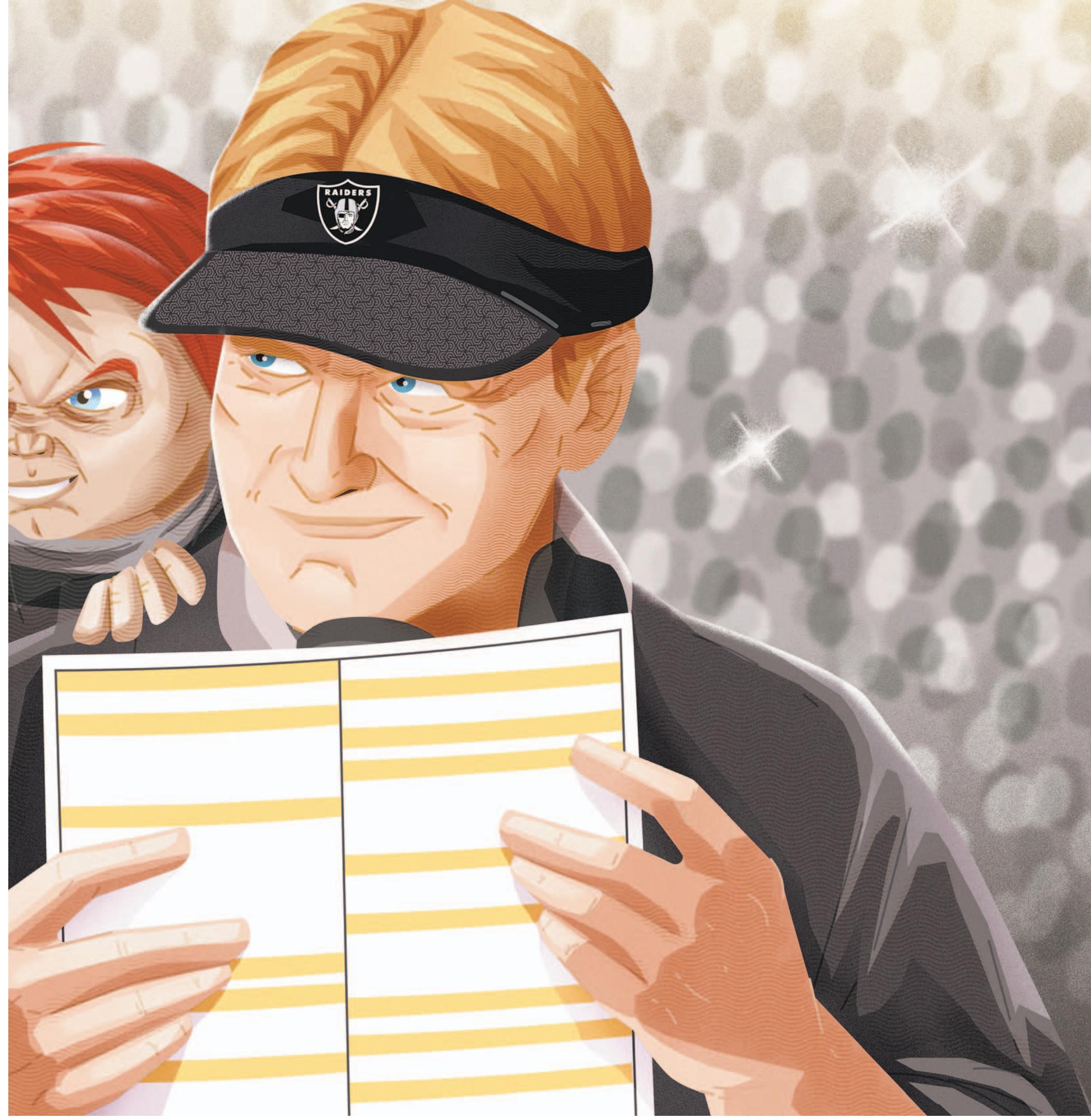


#DON'TFORGETKAP

BACK FOR MORE

STORY BY JERRY MCDONALD
ILLUSTRATION BY DAVIDE BARCO





RAIDER NATION'S BELOVED CARICATURE OF
A COACH RETURNS TO THE SIDELINES HOPING
TO PUSH ALL THE RIGHT BUTTONS ONCE
AGAIN TWO DECADES LATER.
BUT FIRST LET'S REWIND.

The Raiders were getting ready to play the Denver Broncos, and Jon Gruden was deep into his pre-game preparation. Gruden was 34 years old, looked closer to 24, and in his first season as head coach.

Bucky Brooks, an NFL Network analyst who played for the Raiders during Gruden's first season in 1998, described the scene.

"He had headphones on, and he was kind of rocking out to whatever music he was listening to," Brooks said. "I remember thinking, 'I don't know if I've ever seen a coach into music like that.' In my mind it made him more relatable. It made him more like us."

Gruden remains happily stuck in a musical time warp 20 years later.

"Haven't changed at all," the Raiders coach said in his Napa training camp office during a 5 a.m. interview. "I've still got 'Hair of the Dog' by Nazareth. 'Shoot to Thrill' by AC/DC. 'Wango Tango' and 'Cat Scratch Fever' from Ted Nugent. I listened to Bachman-Turner Overdrive this morning. Got the Eagles in there, a little Rolling Stones."

FITTINGLY, THE ROCK FAN HAS BECOME THIS YEAR'S ROCK STAR COACH.

One glimpse of Gruden enthusiastically mixing with Raiders fans provides proof his popularity has grown exponentially since being traded to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in the middle of the night by Al Davis after the 2001 season.

Gruden's return to coaching after nine years in the ESPN "Monday Night Football" broadcast booth is one of the biggest stories of the NFL season. He holds true to many of the prin-

ples he believed in when setting the stage for the closest thing to a run of sustained success since the Raiders returned to Oakland in 1995.

Now 55, Gruden is 17 years removed from being named one of People magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People. When Gruden said tongue-in-cheek at the NFL scouting combine that he was looking to bring football back to 1998, some concluded on social media that the man still revered as "Chucky" by Raiders fans was out of touch.

Gruden is alternately annoyed and amused by the perception, depending on the moment. He has spent the past nine years studying football in his office at a Tampa strip mall in addition to visiting virtually every facility in the league and mining nuggets from the top minds in the sport, both college and pro.

While Gruden reportedly received a 10-year, \$100 million contract, he already had plenty of money. What he craved was the rush of a final score on game day. He was tired of just talking for a living. Nothing causes him to change the channel faster than the latest political viewpoint, "hot take" or chef proclaiming how to make the perfect meal.

"It's every show, every channel," Gruden said. "People talking about politics. People talking about food. I just want to see action."

Gruden said he doesn't listen, but he hears the critics loud and clear.

"Negativity bothers me. I just change the subject," Gruden said. "There's a lot of people who just love that stuff. A lot of people don't like reporting the news anymore, they like making the news."



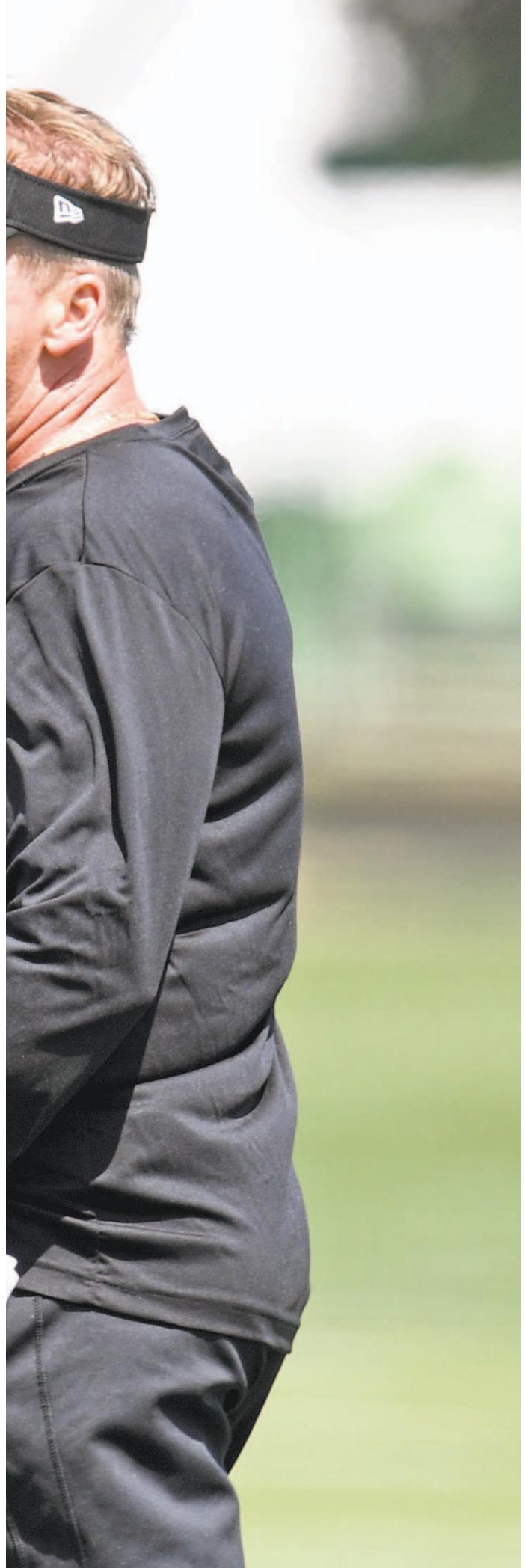


PHOTO BY DOUG DURAN — STAFF

A lot of people are experts on the Raiders that have never been here to practice or met any of our players and coaches. I appreciate it. I was in the media. Some of 'em are pretty damn good. People can throw stones all they want."

Speaking of storylines, Gruden has had it with reliving the good old days with the Raiders. He got that out of his system Jan. 9, the day he was reintroduced as head coach by team owner Mark Davis.

"Everybody keeps asking me about the past," Gruden said. "You get worn out answering all the nostalgia questions."

Yet it's instructive to go back to 1998 and 1999, a pair of 8-8 seasons that changed the culture of an organization that had fallen into disrepair during a 4-12 season under Joe Bugel.

Gruden had already interviewed twice with Al Davis, once as an offensive coordinator candidate in 1996 (he held that position for the Philadelphia Eagles) and again when Bugel was hired in 1997.

WHEN GRUDEN GOT THE JOB, THE RAIDERS WERE A MESS.

"We had nine guys in the off-season program — nine," Gruden said. "We had a tryout camp, brought in lots of guys. Guys that worked at 7-Eleven. Guys that were from Oakland that wanted to try out."

Two of those players, safety Louis Riddick (a former NFL personnel executive and now an ESPN analyst) and fullback Jermaine Williams, were signed to the roster.

Tim Brown, the Raiders' star wide receiver, had never heard of Gruden.

"I thought he was in over his head," Brown said during a phone interview. "Not with the team so much, as having to deal with the organization and Al Davis. They're bringing a 34-year-old kid in here to deal with this? No way."

Brown's first inclination was to exercise an option to void his contract after the 1998 season and hopefully play for his hometown Dallas Cowboys.

Instead, Brown, along with a

Jon Gruden, left, returned to coaching after nine years in the ESPN broadcast booth. Gruden has had it with reliving the good old days with the Raiders. "Everybody keeps asking me about the past. You get worn out answering all the nostalgia questions."

handful of other veterans, found themselves drawn to Gruden's enthusiasm and willingness to implement his own plan with ideas that weren't always compatible with Davis.

"He promised me one thing — that he was going to do things his way," Brown said. "I said, 'Well, then you're going to get fired.' And he said, 'They're going to fire me anyway, so I might as well do things my way.'"

Gruden immediately appealed to veterans to help him remake the culture.

"I remember saying something like, 'It doesn't matter if I'm here for 10 days or 10 years,'" Gruden said. "We sought out Greg Biekert, Albert Lewis, Steve Wisniewski, Russell Maryland, Tim Brown. The real leaders. I asked them for their support. We released players that weren't real happy Raiders. I think it got their attention, it got 'em to buy in."

"Real players want to work. They want structure, some discipline. I tried to sell myself, my staff, my program. I think they saw, slowly but surely, the changes worked."

Gruden, then and now, is quick to praise players who know their assignments and share his passion. Come to practice unprepared or with a hint of lethargy, and he can be blunt and profane.

"His enthusiasm is infectious, and even though he was young, he had credibility in the ability to make you better, and that translates whether it's a first-year player such as myself or a multiple Pro Bowler like Eric Allen," Riddick said. "I never minded the yelling or getting cussed. I felt he was supportive and trying to make me better."

IT WASN'T ALWAYS SMOOTH.

The roster was still thin, and injuries played a major role in a team that started out 6-2 finishing 8-8. Maryland, a defensive tackle who arrived in 1996 after winning two Super Bowls with the Dallas Cowboys, watched with interest.

"It was a little tough for him at first," Maryland said. "Guys would give him a hard time. Darrell

Russell and a couple of D-linemen would say crazy stuff to him just to see if they could get a reaction. But the thing I noticed was he stayed the course. He didn't care what other people thought. He had a plan, and he knew what he wanted to do. People started to get in line."

BIEKERT SAID GRUDEN'S PRESENCE MADE PLAYERS LESS COMFORTABLE IN A NECESSARY WAY.

"I remember our first meeting and a little golf outing we had in Alameda," Biekert said. "We didn't really know who he was, but you just sensed this was a guy that was really expecting a lot out of all of us and made that clear in no uncertain terms. It was like, 'OK, we'd better get going or we're not going to be here.' It put you on edge, but at the same time, he has this personality that gets you excited about what you're doing."

Running back Harvey Williams, who joined the Raiders in 1994, contributed as a runner/receiver during Gruden's first season. But his lasting legacy is measured in deeper ways.

It was Williams who first noticed that Gruden's pained facial contortions were similar to the murderous doll in the 1988 movie "Child's Play."

"Every time I'd look at him after a bad play in practice, he had his face all scrunched up," Williams said during the Raiders' alumni weekend in Napa. "I'm thinking, 'Man, he looks like that little doll Chucky. I started saying it, and everybody started calling him Chucky. It just blew up."

Fans began bringing "Chucky" dolls to the Coliseum, the dolls dressed in coaching day attire and complete with a headset.

Gruden's fondness for veterans was reinforced in 1999, when players such as running backs Zack Crockett and Tyrone Wheatley joined the roster.

"We were trying to prove ourselves, and he was trying to prove himself at the same time," said Crockett, now a Raiders scout. "He would give guys like myself, a journeyman at the time, an opportunity to reinvent themselves. He'd say, 'You're going to start over fresh.'"

Gruden, right, is 17 years removed from being named one of People magazine's 50 Most Beautiful People. Some think Gruden's pained facial contortions are similar to the murderous doll in the 1988 movie "Child's Play."

In a league that often phases out veteran players, Gruden embraces them. Jerry Rice came on board in 2001 and thrived with Gruden pushing him.

"I think there's a lack of respect today for veterans, period — in every walk of life," Gruden said. "I like to show old footage of players. ... I think it's a great way to learn. Why is this guy a Hall of Fame player? Let me tell you why Jerry Rice is in the Hall of Fame. Let me show you why Jerry Rice is in the Hall of Fame. Maybe you can steal some things."

Gruden's biggest move during his first Raiders tenure was an unpopular one. After going through three quarterbacks who all were sidelined at various times by groin injuries — Jeff George, Donald Hollas and Wade Wilson — Gruden sold Davis on the idea of making Rich Gannon the starting quarterback.

It took some doing. George was a big-ticket free agent signed in 1997 to replace Jeff Hostetler and passed for 3,917 yards and 29 touchdowns. He had the kind of arm Davis loved. As Gruden was poring over film after getting the job to evaluate his own personnel, Gannon, then with the Kansas City Chiefs, caught his eye.

Gannon completed 15 of 21 passes for 221 yards and a touchdown and rushed for another score as the Chiefs beat the Raiders 30-0 in December 1997. He was 32 and had never seized the starting position in Washington, Minnesota or Kansas City.

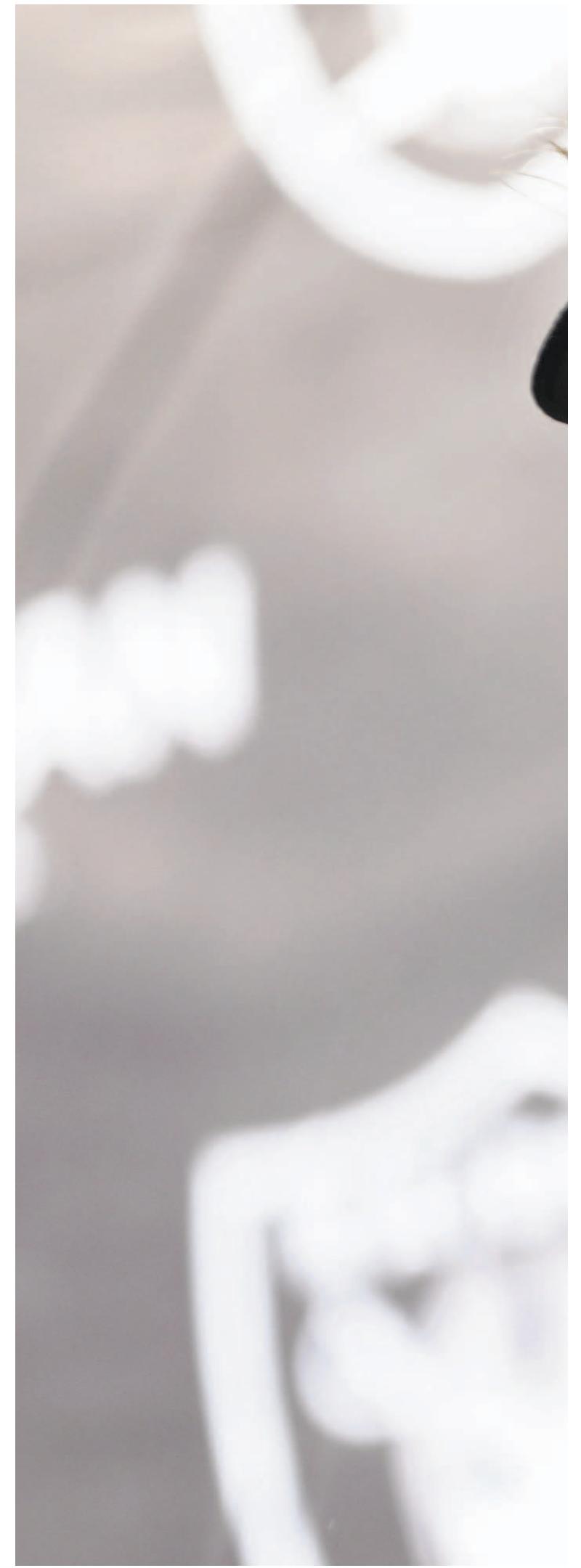
Gannon led the Chiefs on a five-game winning streak to help secure a playoff berth, but they went back to injured starter Elvis Grbac and lost a first-round playoff game. Gannon started 10 games for the Chiefs in 1998, then when his contract expired, he began looking for a new home.

During a free-agent visit the following spring, Gruden and Gannon watched film, then talked football at a Mexican restaurant on the San Leandro marina.

As Gannon recalled, there was an instant bond. The two spoke the same language.

"You can sit down with someone — at least I could, anyway — and in an hour you could get a sense of their aptitude and foot

Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group





ball IQ," Gannon said. "Jon was off the charts. He had amazing retention and the ability to process a lot of information. His recall was phenomenal. I knew right away we were going to hit it off."

The decision to allow a roster bonus to lapse on George and instead sign Gannon wasn't well-received. But some in the Raiders locker room, who wondered why Gannon wasn't starting for the Chiefs, were delighted.

"It seemed like every time he was in there, he moved their offense," Biekert said. "We would sit in meetings when we played the Chiefs and say, 'Don't knock their starter out of the lineup because we don't want Gannon to come in.' I remember thinking, 'I can't believe we really got him.'"

Another 8-8 season followed, largely because of place-kicking issues. The Raiders lost those eight games by a total of 34 points and went into the fourth quarter with a chance to win every week.

It began what is the lost statistic in Gruden's first tenure with the Raiders. In the last 50 regular-season games Gruden coached in Oakland, the Raiders never lost a game by double figures. There were no cosmetic late rallies, either. The Raiders went into the fourth quarter of all those games with a chance to win.

The first two years were a springboard to a 12-4 season and an AFC West title, the first of three in a row, and Gruden felt the foundation was laid in the first two years.

"GUYS WERE WORKING HARD. THEY WERE PLAYING TOGETHER. Buying in to the system," Gruden said. "There was a lot of progress. I think we were playing pretty damn good football. Had we made some field goals those first couple of years, we might have made the playoffs."

The end came suddenly after a second-round loss to New England in the infamous "Tuck-Rule" game following the 2001 season. Gruden and agent Bob LaMonte were embroiled in a contract dispute with an owner in Davis whose philosophy was to spend his money on players, not coaches.

At training camp, Gruden is back into the old grind. He still awakens when it's dark outside and scripts every practice himself on a computer.

Davis opted to trade Gruden to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers for two first-round picks, two second-round picks and \$8 million.

What happened next pains Raiders fans to this day. The Raiders finally made it back to the Super Bowl, where they were blown out by Gruden's Buccaneers 48-21 in Super Bowl XXXVII in San Diego.

It may have been a storybook finish for Gruden, but there would be no fairytale ending. The Bucs went 45-51 over his last six years, made it to the playoffs twice and lost each time. There were occasional disputes with players, most notably wide receiver Keyshawn Johnson.

Gruden never found his Gannon at Tampa Bay, cycling through the likes of Brad Johnson, Chris Simms, Brian Griese, Bruce Gradkowski and Jeff Garcia. Gruden was fired after the 2008 season.

"I'm proud of what we did there," Gruden said. "I never once got in my car and went home and said, 'Man, I didn't put in a good day's work.' I could have had some better relationships with players, but I had some great relationships, too. I don't have a lot of regrets, other than we didn't win enough."

Nine years in the booth followed, and every offseason there were rumors Gruden would return. LaMonte said there wasn't a single season where major college and NFL teams didn't reach out.

All the while, Gruden said he was committed to ESPN, even as he was gradually coming around to the idea of coaching.

"I've been at the edge of the pool about to jump in a few times," Gruden said.

Peyton Manning, the former Colts and Broncos quarterback with whom Gruden developed a close friendship, figured a comeback was inevitable.

"I'd see him when he'd do games and I'd say, 'How you doin' Jon?'" Manning said during a visit to Napa. "He'd say, 'Haven't lost a game in six years.' I'd say, 'But you haven't won one, either.' I could tell he always thought about that. When you're not playing, you don't get the pain of losing, but you don't get the exhilaration of



winning, either."

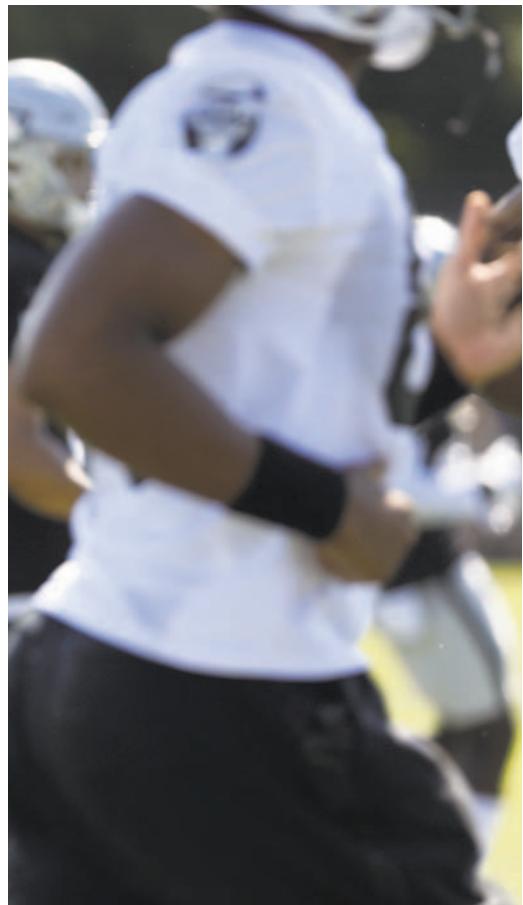
At training camp, Gruden is back into the old grind. He still awakens when it's dark outside and scripts every practice himself on a computer. His desk is cluttered with papers, and there are reading glasses that weren't there 20 years ago.

Before practice, Gruden is serious, focused and looks nothing like the rock star who made it his mission to interact with as many Raiders fans as possible during an event he hosted at Ricky's Sports Theatre and Grill before training camp began.

In Napa, the fans still bring dolls, shout "Chucky," and Gruden clearly enjoys the adulation, as well as the passion.

"I'm a grunt. I'm a dirty, old grunt. I like to be with the real fans. I like to be with real people," Gruden said. "I like fans that love football. I love the energy around preseason, the excitement of a new season. I like being around it."

On this day, Gruden said he got



Laura A. ODA/STAFF

going at 4:30 a.m. — a full hour later than when the very same interviewer met him for a “day at training camp” feature nearly 20 years ago.

“Since I got hired, I haven’t seen the light of day, really,” Gruden said. “It’s about getting this team on track and delivering for Oakland and the Raiders. That’s all I’m trying to do. I love being back in the grind.”

Gruden is asked how he could possibly enjoy that kind of schedule, and he recalled a line by Warren Sapp, a star defensive tackle from his championship Bucs team now in the Pro Football of Fame.

“I’ve been told a lot, ‘You’ve got to be miserable to be happy,’ ” Gruden said. “Warren Sapp and I agreed on that one thing. At the end of a game, he was tired, he was sore ... that’s when he thrived. I remember him on the field screaming, ‘I love the misery!’ ”

“I was thinking, ‘So do I. So do I.’ ”

10 defining moments from Chucky 1.0

1 New Kid in Town

Jan. 22, 1998: Gruden, an offensive coordinator for the Philadelphia Eagles, is introduced as the Raiders’ 12th head coach at the auditorium at the club facility on Harbor Bay Parkway in Alameda. He replaces Joe Bugel, who was 4-12 in his lone season as head coach and ended with a five-game losing streak. Gruden interviewed with Davis as a prospective coordinator in 1996 and as a potential head coach in 1997. “My job is to give our players direction, give ‘em leadership and inspire ‘em,” Gruden says. Said owner Al Davis: “Something has to be done here to change the environment, and I would say we have a ways to go.”

2 The First Game

Sept. 6, 1998: The Raiders lose 28-8 at Arrowhead Stadium. They fall behind quickly as rookie cornerback Charles Woodson is burned for three completions including a touchdown by Andre Rison. Quarterback Jeff George is sacked 10 times, including six by Derek Thomas. The Raiders are penalized 15 times for 134 yards. “There’s some guys that finished this game hard. That’s what we’re going to build this team on,” Gruden says.

3 The First Win

Sept. 13, 1998: Greg Davis kicks a 26-yard field goal with 2:35 remaining to give the Raiders a 20-17 win over the Giants before a crowd of 40,545 at the Coliseum. Jeff George passes for 303 yards and Napoleon Kaufman rushes for 139 yards to lead the Raiders. The Raiders prevail despite 16 penalties for 113 yards and four fumbles. “It’s like having your first kid. It’s a great feeling. I’m proud of the team. They had a lot of adversity and fought for four quarters,” Gruden says.

4 The Birth of Chucky

Nov. 15, 1998: Harvey Williams rushes for 79 yards on 12 carries and has a 25-yard touchdown run in a 20-17 win over Seattle at the Coliseum. At one point, however, Williams goes the wrong way on an audible and incurs the wrath of Gruden on the sideline. The arched eye. The wicked smile. Crazy eyes. Profanity in torrents. Williams tells reporters Gruden looked like “Chucky,” the murderous doll from the movie “Child’s Play.”

Home fans begin bringing “Chucky” dolls adorned in Raiders gear, complete with headset. The nickname sticks.

5 Magic at Arrowhead

Jan. 2, 2000: The Raiders are 7-8 going into the regular-season finale against the Kansas City Chiefs. Al Davis later says he was considering firing Gruden, who was 15-16 as a head coach. The Raiders fall behind 17-0 at Arrowhead Stadium but rally for a 41-38 overtime win. The Chiefs are knocked out of the postseason. Gruden celebrates wildly in a silent stadium. The win propels the Raiders into the offseason and a division title the following year. “Once you see a team that never quits, you know you’ve got a chance,” Gruden says in his 2003 autobiography.

6 Corraling the Colts

Sept. 10, 2000: Peyton Manning is slicing the Raiders to ribbons and has the Colts up 21-0 early in the second quarter and 24-7 at halftime. The Raiders rally for a 38-31 win. Quarterback Rich Gannon rushes for three touchdowns. Linebacker Greg Biekert deciphers Manning’s audibles and flummoxes the quarterback. “There were no big speeches. We knew we would get the ball to start the second half. If we could march it down the field, we were back in the game,” Gruden says. The Raiders come home feeling they can beat anybody.

7 Winning the Division

Dec. 24, 2000: The Raiders bounce back from a loss to Seattle with a 52-9 win over the Carolina Panthers to secure the AFC West and home-field advantage in the playoffs. It is their first division title since 1990 when the team was in Los Angeles. Rich Gannon throws a career-high five touchdown passes. Afterward, Gruden walks along the railing, exchanging high-fives from an adoring fan base. “It came down to Christmas Eve at our place. What a feeling,” Gruden says.

8 The First Playoff

Jan. 6, 2001: The playoffs are back at the Coliseum for the first time since the Raiders and Jim Plunkett beat Houston and Ken Stabler in December 1980 en route to a Super Bowl championship. Tony James ignites a 27-0 win over the Miami

Dolphins with a 90-yard interception return on Miami’s first series. The roar of the crowd is deafening. Gruden again takes a victory tour along the stands and to the Black Hole. “After going three-and-out in the first series, I sagged. Next thing you know, (James) is running down the sidelines,” Gruden says. The Raiders lose 16-3 to the Baltimore Ravens in the AFC championship game after Rich Gannon is lost to a shoulder injury, courtesy of a belly-flop tackle by Tony Siragusa.

9 The Tuck Rule

Jan. 19, 2002: The Raiders, following a resounding 38-24 playoff win over the New York Jets, visit the New England Patriots in a divisional round game. They appear poised for a 13-10 win after Charles Woodson knocks the ball loose from Tom Brady on a blitz, with Greg Biekert recovering the fumble. On replay, referee Walt Coleman invokes the obscure “Tuck Rule.” Incomplete pass. Adam Vinatieri ties the score with a 45-yard field goal, a low line drive, in a driving snow. The Raiders lose 16-13 in overtime. “How an official could consider it and rule it conclusive is shocking to me,” Gruden says. The Raiders’ season is over, and although no one knew it at the time, it also is Gruden’s last game as Raiders head coach.

10 Traded to Bucs

Feb. 18, 2002: Owner Al Davis calls Gruden at 1 a.m. to inform him he has received an offer of two first-round draft picks, two second-round picks and \$8 million to trade the coach to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Contract negotiations with Gruden for an extension with the Raiders had been suspended after a three-game losing streak to end the regular season. The Bucs had botched offers to Bill Parcells and Steve Spurrier and were desperate. Neither senior assistant Bruce Allen nor CEO Amy Trask are consulted before Davis makes the deal. Davis asks Gruden if he wants to go. “When your boss asks you if you’d like to leave, there’s really only one answer,” Gruden says. Gruden leads the Buccaneers to the Super Bowl XXXVII against Bill Callahan and the Raiders, where he prevails 48-21 over his former team.

— Jerry McDonald

It's (not quite) Vegas, baby!

Mark Davis' delayed jackpot in the Nevada desert makes for some odd times in Oakland, where the resolve of a fanbase is being tested

After the Raiders introduced Jon Gruden as head coach in January with a massive news conference that was more like a political rally, I had only one question racing through my mind.

Yes, I was curious if Gruden — after a decade away from coaching — had the ability to lift the Raiders back to playoff contention after a disastrous six-win 2017 season. And, yes, I wondered how Gruden would deal with general manager Reggie McKenzie and quarterback Derek Carr. I even pondered if Gruden's hiring would bring about more prime-time games for the Raiders (spoiler alert: It did) and lamented the games that can only be described as "deadline busters."

But the question running through my head was larger than those musings — much larger: What are the Raiders still doing in Oakland?

I seem to remember the team getting approval from the NFL to move to Las Vegas, but, for some reason, the team didn't leave. Yes, if I remember correctly, the Raiders practiced in Alameda and played their home games at the Oakland Coliseum last season. Seems they plan on doing the same in 2018. After that, they have no idea where they're playing. Seriously, they have no agreement with Oakland or Las Vegas for the 2019 season.

So, yes, this might be the last season in Oakland for the Raiders. Don't expect a formal announcement though — they wouldn't



Dieter
Kurtenbach

want to highlight how weird this current arrangement is.

The Raiders' squatting in the East Bay is as peculiar as any franchise relocation I can recall in modern-day professional sports.

We just saw two teams move to Los Angeles, but the Rams didn't stay in St. Louis after they got the OK to go to California, and the Chargers didn't hang around in San Diego — they instead are playing in a 30,000-seat soccer stadium because they left the second their relocation application was stamped.

There weren't three more years of the Browns in Cleveland after Art Modell was told he could take the team to Baltimore. You probably don't remember the Tennessee Oilers — they played in Memphis for a year before moving to Nashville and then changing their name to the Titans — but I assure you, they exist, because they didn't hang around Houston.

And the most famous relocation of them all — the Colts leaving Baltimore — happened in the middle of the night, unannounced. One day the Colts were in Maryland, the next day, they were in Indiana.

The Sonics — as arduous and drawn out as the effort to save them was — didn't play an extra season in Seattle after the move to Oklahoma City was approved by the NBA. The Expos played their last game in Montreal the same day Major League Baseball announced it was moving the team to Washington. The NHL's Whalers, Nordiques, Jets and Thrashers all moved to new markets before

the start of their next season. Even MLS teams don't hang around their old market after the league approves a relocation.

And yet the Raiders are still in Oakland, pretending that this is in any way normal.

What's even more peculiar about the failure to depart is the fact that — as far as I can tell — it's not being met with much resistance from the Raiders' fan base.

Make no mistake, Bay Area-based Raiders fans, this team is abandoning you.

I understand that the Raiders' fan base is different than perhaps any other NFL team's. And I get that the world — thanks to the Internet — is proverbially flat, so you'll always be able to watch the Raiders on TV and read about them online, but the Silver and Black will no longer be the East Bay's team come ... whenever.

Say goodbye to tailgating at the Coliseum, taking in the game and then heading to Ricky's. No, if you want to take in the Raiders game, you'll have to find a flight to Las Vegas ... eventually.

I think I know the cause of the lack of acrimony: There was no way Oakland was going to build a new stadium for the Raiders — it's still paying off Mount Davis, installed in an effort to bring the Raiders back from Los Angeles in 1995. Nor was there a chance that the poorest owner in the NFL, Mark Davis, was going to turn down \$750 million in free money from Nevada, Clark County and Las Vegas. There's an acceptance over this team leaving the East

Bay — it's borderline rational.

But when has sports fandom ever been a rational endeavor?

In their effort to recreate the 2006 Jennifer Aniston/Vince Vaughn movie "The Break-Up," (something I have done as well — it resulted in far fewer laughs than the movie and far more animosity than the Raiders' situation), the Raiders seem to be pandering to the East Bay fan base they were so keen to leave behind.

Do you really think signing Marshawn Lynch was purely a football decision? No, signing Oakland's favorite son gave the Raiders a public relations shield.

And after last year, when the team imploded and that Lynch cred was wearing thin, what did Davis do? He brought back the most popular coach in franchise history, who was quick to mention how much he loves The Town.

"I love the city of Oakland. I had a son here, and some of my great memories in life are in Oakland, and I want to give them two of the best years of football that I can possibly help deliver," Gruden said at his introductory pep rally. "I'll let Mark talk about Vegas ... (A) big reason why I'm here is the passion I have for the city of Oakland and this franchise. I would like to fill (the Black Hole) with Raider fans at least seven or eight more times."

Davis is the right guy to talk about Vegas, because that's what he's all about these days. Despite the pandering, mentally, he's already left Oakland behind.

Sure, he'll echo Gruden's senti-



ments when he's asked for a quote on the matter, but actions speak louder than words.

There are little things, such as the team's official Twitter account wishing the Vegas Golden Knights — and not the Bay Ar-

Will the new home of the Raiders in Las Vegas have a Black Hole?

PHOTO BY BRIAN Bahr
— GETTY IMAGES

ea's team, the San Jose Sharks — well in the Stanley Cup playoffs. And then there's big stuff: the firing of play-by-play announcer Greg Papa in favor of the new Mr. Las Vegas sports, Brent Musburger. Either way, Davis is

letting everyone know where his allegiance stands — it's Vegas, baby.

In the meantime, his team is in Oakland, baby, until further notice. Perhaps Davis believes there can't be acrimony until you

actually leave. Seeing the support for this team in the community, he might be right.

It doesn't have to be this way. I would argue it shouldn't be this way.

But it is, and it's so very weird.

THE RAIDERS

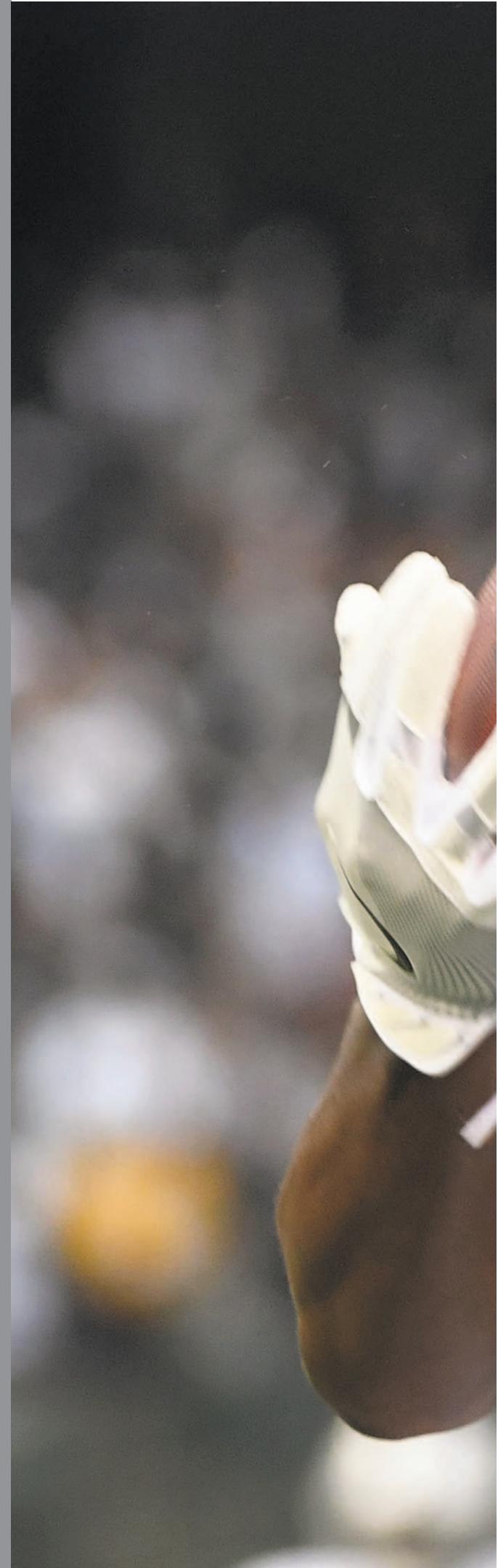
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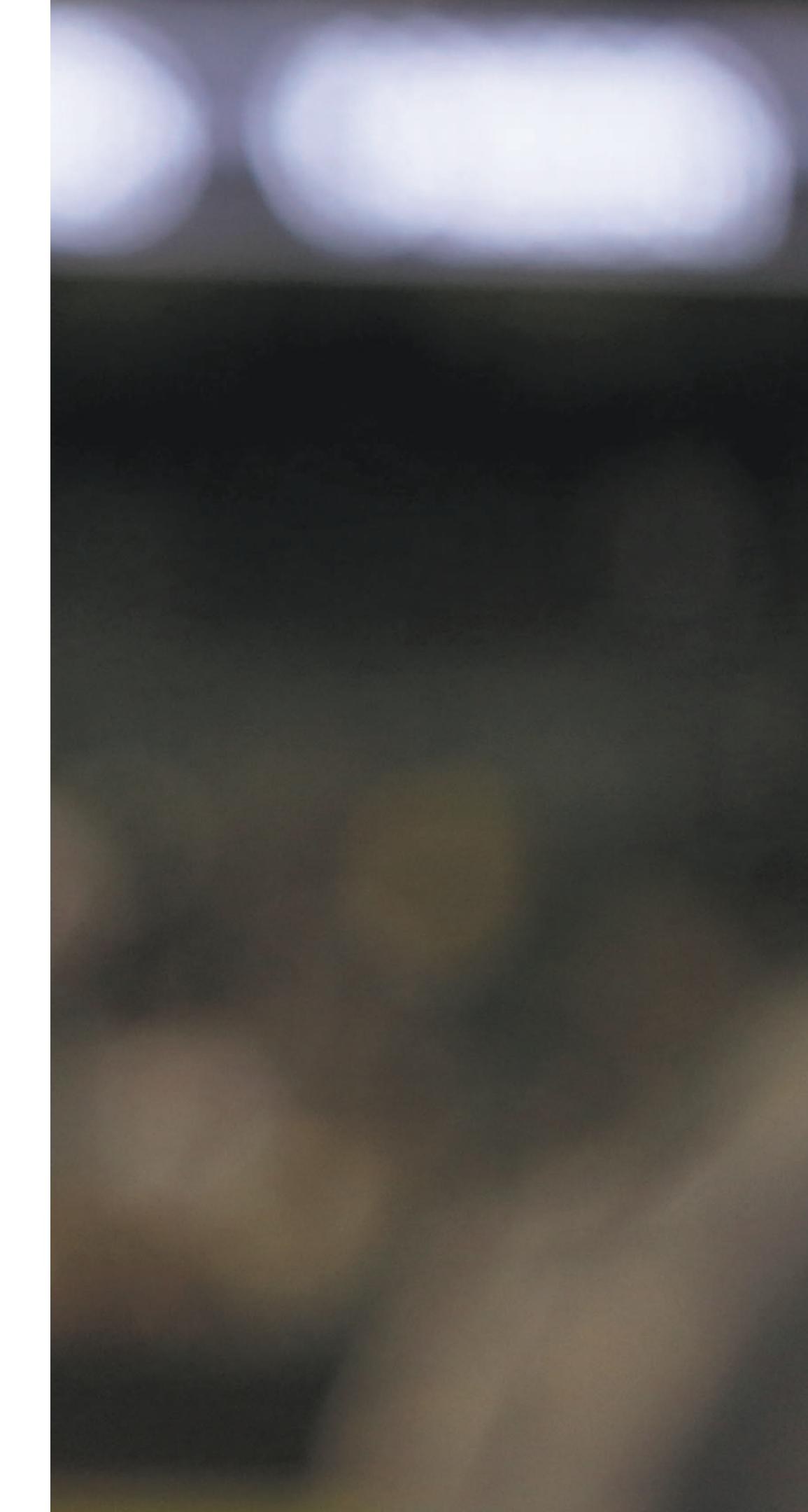
With a pass-happy coach in place, is this the season **AMARI COOPER** shows he belongs in the 'elite NFL receiver' conversation?

BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN
PHOTO BY DOUG DURAN









Amari Cooper cracks a smile only if you ask the perfect question with the perfect dose of humor sprinkled in, and even that might not make him flinch.

For example, a rare smile flashed after a reporter asked earlier this year if Cooper had ever seen a coach's face turn beet red for all seven periods of an offseason workout, referring — of course — to the new guy, Jon Gruden.

Outside of that, Cooper's grins come few and far between. He's not irritated at life, rather he's just a guy whose personality won't always light up a room if you're not in his corner.

Elite receivers such as Antonio Brown and Odell Beckham Jr.? Now those are vibrant personalities that match gridiron talent.

You'll never see Cooper take a helicopter to training camp like Brown or jump out of a moving car and dance to Drake's "In My Feelings" like Beckham. Even Julio Jones, clearly elite but carrying fewer theatrics than the other two, has more pizazz than Cooper off the field. Cooper seems just fine with who he is outside the No. 89 jersey. He's trying to match those guys in another way.

Widely considered the leaders of the NFL's elite wide receiver fraternity, Pittsburgh's Brown, New York's Beckham and Atlanta's Jones highlight a club Cooper can see on the horizon. Reggie

Wayne, who ranks in the all-time top 10 in receptions and receiving yards, ranked the top 10 receivers in the league for NFL.com and placed Cooper in the "just missed" category along with four others. How many receivers are "elite" in the NFL is open to debate, but the bottom line remains that Cooper isn't one of them entering his fourth year in the league.

If there ever were a time to join the upper echelon at his position, it would be now, under a coach who has produced a 1,000-yard receiver in each of his 11 seasons as a head coach in the NFL. If Cooper can't do it in 2018, or in the near future under Gruden, he might never be able to.

"You just look at what (Gruden) did for me for the four years I had him," said Tim Brown, a Hall of Fame wide receiver who starred under Gruden in Oakland. "Look at my numbers and touchdowns and things of that nature. If he could do that for a guy who was 32 or whatever at the time, man, what can he do for a guy that's 25 with all the talent that he has?"

Because Brown told us to look at his numbers, let's do just that. In four years under Gruden in Oakland, Brown averaged 84.5 catches, 1,162.25 receiving yards and 8.75 touchdown catches per year from 1998-2001.

Cooper hasn't eclipsed 83 catches, 1,153 receiving yards or seven touchdowns in his first three years in the league. Brown was 32, 33, 34 and 35 when he

Oakland's Amari Cooper looks on from the sidelines late in a preseason game at the Coliseum on Aug. 10. Cooper is the only receiver in Raiders history to post back-to-back 1,000-yard seasons to begin his career.



posted those numbers.

Cooper doesn't turn 25 until June 2019, but the point stays the same: a 24-year-old receiver in his prime is playing under a coach whose offense should provide every possible chance for his elite-ness to shine through.

Cooper is the only receiver in Raiders history to post back-to-back 1,000-yard receiving seasons to begin his career. He averaged 77.5 catches, 1,111.5 receiving yards and 5.5 touchdown catches over 2015 and 2016.

In 2017, despite catching seven touchdowns, he reeled in only 48 passes for 680 yards. This season, he has a healthy quarterback in Derek Carr playing for a quarterback guru in Gruden, a pairing that should do wonders for Cooper. Oh, and don't forget adding

Jordy Nelson, Ryan Switzer and Martavis Bryant, all upgrades over last year's group behind Cooper that will alleviate pressure.

"That's what you want as a wide receiver. That's what you want as a playmaker. You want the ball in those crucial situations. You want to be depended on," Cooper said. "You want to be counted on when it's time to make a big play. ... We definitely have a lot of specialty plays for myself and for other guys as well. I see it playing out well. We try to execute it every day out there on the field, and so far it's been going really good."

Injuries slowed Cooper's trajectory last season, but he's still tasked this year with proving he's the receiver he was in Years 1 and 2. A matchup nightmare, a threat

Amari Cooper, 24, is a threat to score at any time from any spot on the field.

to score at any time from any spot on the field, a flat-out dominant wide receiver. Not a hobbled No. 1 option who could produce a deep catch-and-run every now and then and also drop catchable balls just as often, if not more.

Tim Brown, Jerry Rice, Keyshawn Johnson, Keenan McCardell, Michael Clayton, Joey Gallo- way and Antonio Bryant comprise the crew that gives Gruden a 1,000-yard receiver in each of his 11 head-coaching years.

Yes, yards aren't the sole factor in determining class, but the gaudy numbers, if anything, prove Gruden's history of grooming pass-catchers who produce.

If there's one receiver capable of extending Gruden's streak to 12 years, those 1,000 yards being just part of his repertoire, it's the

player who Gruden said would be the focal point of his offense.

"Hopefully we can put an offense in that he can play in for four or five or six years like most of the great players have a chance to do," Gruden said. "I think continuity is important, not only for quarterbacks and football players at other positions, but also wide receivers. I think he has all the stuff you're looking for. He has rare size. He came in here at 223 pounds. He has very good speed. He's elusive. He's smart. He's a great competitor."

Jordy Nelson, who has mentored Cooper since arriving in the Bay Area after 10 years with the Packers, insists he's not here to be a No. 1 option. He realizes that's Cooper's job, one he has had since his rookie season in 2015.



Even in fewer than than five months as his teammate, Nelson sees potential in Cooper to reach their position's penthouse. You could argue Nelson knows what it takes because he's been there before with Aaron Rodgers throwing him the ball for a decade.

"From what I've seen, he has the ability. His quickness and athleticism, the way he understands the game, hands, everything. He has it all. When you get to that elite level, more than anything it's the consistency aspect of it," Nelson said. "When you think of the elites, you think of someone like (Larry) Fitzgerald, who are good year after year after year."

"I think that's how you get there and sustain that. Being consistent, which I think he's been doing a great job as far as I can

tell since I've been here, day in and day out. That's where it starts, out here in practice. It'll transfer into games."

Maybe it's just a matter of playing as he did the first two years of his career for one or two more seasons, and he'll be thrown into the elite discussion. But one thing's for certain: Cooper can't have a second straight down year if he wants to reach that peak, especially not under a coach who'll do everything possible to ensure he's not the 2017 Amari Cooper again.

More than anything, Cooper is healthy. He missed games last year with a concussion and high-ankle sprain, separately, and Carr told SiriusXM's Adam Schein after the season, "He will never tell you, and he'll never

With a season like his first two, Amari Cooper will be thrown into the "elite" receiver category.

even talk about it, but that man was out there playing on one foot."

Cooper entered training camp this year, again, with more muscle, more speed, more miles on his 24-year-old legs.

"I feel like he came into his rookie year like 16 years old, so he comes back bigger and faster every year," Carr said. "It's like 'Coop, hey man, chill out a little bit. Don't get too big, we'll move you to running back or something ... He's healthy, he looks great, he feels great."

Cooper, in typical Cooper fashion, remained nondescript when asked about his feelings playing for an offensive-minded head coach with a proven track record of extracting results from receivers. "Exciting" and "cool" were his

words of choice, but it wouldn't seem he really felt either if you listened.

Don't let that fool you.

Cooper might not act the part of an Antonio Brown, Odell Beckham Jr. or even Julio Jones, and he might not even play the part this season. This year, at the very least, offers a chance to climb closer to their lofty perch.

All the pieces are in place for Cooper to enter the elite discussion, and there's one certain aspect of his pending rise: He'll allow his play to speak for itself.

"I think he's going to be incredible, man," Tim Brown said. "Obviously, the guy has all the talent in the world, all the ability in the world, and if he buys into what that Z position calls for him to do, it's going to be incredible."

WILL THE REAL DEREK CARR PLEASE STAND UP?

After shades of MVP talent, Raiders QB took a major leap backward last season. With a commitment to his physical regimen and a QB guru in place, will this be his defining moment?

STORY BY BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN
ILLUSTRATION BY MARTIN SATI





Derek Carr wasted no time moving on from a dismal New Year's Eve in 2017, a day that featured a 20-point loss to the Chargers and Mark Davis firing Jack Del Rio with three years left on his contract.

After the owner scurried out of the stadium, players juggled frustration with shock after their head coach's dismissal and the Raiders' underwhelming 2017 reached a finite end, the starting quarterback reached for his cell phone.

Eric Mahanke remembers "Super Bowl" flashing across his screen.

"I know exactly what he's talking about," said Mahanke, Carr's trainer back home in Bakersfield. "That's him just setting a standard for himself, like, 'This is what we're doing.'"

Carr and Mahanke turned the page toward preparing for the 2018 season almost right away without a broken leg to wait on like the offseason prior. They formulated a plan to make Carr healthier, stronger, more mobile and more flexible. Nothing too drastic, just ways for Carr to fine-tune his physical arsenal to ensure he's more like the 2016 Carr than the 2017 one.

This year, Mahanke noticed the biggest January-July leap in Carr's four offseasons as a pro. Now he's a fully healthy quarterback in the hands of Jon Gruden, and that alone should elevate Carr closer to that near-MVP signal-caller of two seasons ago. Tack on changes to his diet, workout warm-ups, and maybe most important, the way he's challenged by his head coach, and Carr might just be onto something here in 2018.

"It's injury recovery, it's food, his coaches, his workout plan in the offseason, it's everything," Mahanke said. "It's aligned to where he would want to be. He's prepared and set up to succeed

big-time, better than he ever has, for sure, as a Raider."

FREE ON THE FIELD

The offseason tweaks started with mobility, not because Carr wants to scramble for first downs all season, rather to simply move more freely wherever he is on the field.

For the first 20-30 minutes of workouts, Carr emphasized rolling out his muscles and stretching, pinpointing tight areas and always hitting the hips, lower back and the T-spine in the middle of his back.

On days when he wasn't doing total body strength training, Carr focused on speed, agility, stretching and throwing.

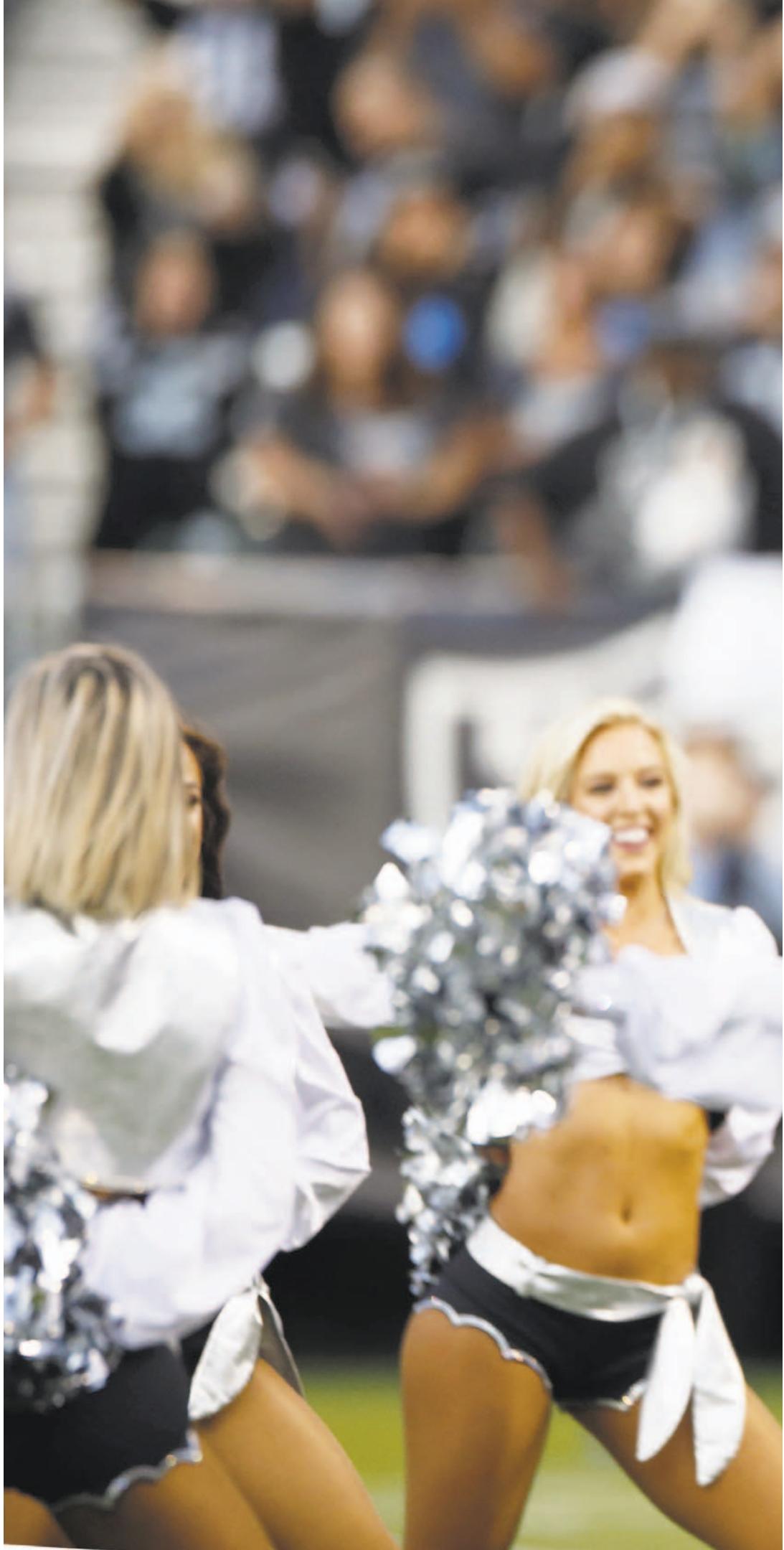
He entered the offseason striving to improve his range of motion, and he did just that. He possessed enough pure strength and speed after the 2017 season that he could afford to work on more niche aspects of his repertoire such as pliability and mobility.

"Think about how much you walk all day, how much you're moving, bending stuff up and you're only gonna stretch one time just to go practice?" Carr told the Bay Area News Group. "If we can stay more flexible before that, then when we go stretch you can stretch even farther. Now you're sitting somewhere where your stride length is longer, you're at less risk for injuries if you get hit and bent certain ways, and things like that, and honestly overall health, too."

"Stretching has to be a lifestyle. It sounds funny ... Focusing on those things while still doing this stuff and getting after it, staying strong, mixing the two has been really nice."

In the kitchen, Carr altered his diet to better fuel the physical tweaks. Less protein powder, power bars, gluten foods, candy,

After saying goodbye to the 2017 season, Derek Carr quickly focused on preparing for 2018, without a broken leg to wait on. They formulated a plan to make Carr healthier, stronger, more mobile and more flexible.





ice cream and corn chips. More fruits and vegetables, 100 percent grass-fed beef and chicken, properly raised salmon and a higher ratio of Omega-3 fatty acids to Omega-6s.

"Just certain things that we found create inflammation," Carr said of what he removed from his diet. "I was like, man, especially in a business like this, you got to feel great every day. Being more flexible, making sure the muscles aren't as tight, making sure they're getting the right stuff, the stuff that really God made for us, that's stuff we talk about all the time. God created this stuff. I think we should eat it, and so just adding more of that kind of stuff has really really helped a lot."

You wouldn't notice it by looking at him in a helmet and practice jersey, but Carr feels healthier. That, although not the foremost reason those around him think he'll be better this year, is a sturdy foundation to build upon. Mahanke also pointed out that Carr looks thinner, but only because he has shed body fat despite remaining around the same weight.

With healthier foods feeding an improved physique entering training camp, Carr had his desirable body to execute whatever ounce of football direction Gruden peppered him with. And there were plenty. Randomly during team film sessions, Gruden will often single out his starting quarterback and force him to respond on cue in front of the team.

Gruden barks at Carr to read the coverage on the screen, to explain what the cornerbacks will do, to tell everyone in the room where he'd ideally throw the ball. That didn't happen under Jack Del Rio and Todd Downing.

Carr cherishes the challenge of responding on the spot in front of his teammates, even if the setting is just a meeting room. If he can't make a split-second decision correctly during a game, the whole operation falls apart, so why not practice nailing his responses first when the bright lights aren't shining?

"Derek looks like a completely different person in my eyes, just from the way he's attacking the game, from the way he's attacking the challenges that Gruden has been giving to him," second-year Raider and starting tight end Jared Cook said. "Every time that Gruden asks him a question, he gets it right, no hesitation. Every time Gruden asks him to get up in front of a meeting room and call out a play, run a play, get to the right check, get to the right audible, he does it every time.

"That's a responsibility that Derek never had last year. You see a totally different player out of him. He's attacking the game differently mentally, and he has a totally different attitude going into this year."

A NEW HEAD COACH

Carr loved Del Rio, but he was a defensive-minded head coach. There's been a marked difference, just in the fact a quarterback has a head coach known for being a quarterbacks guy.

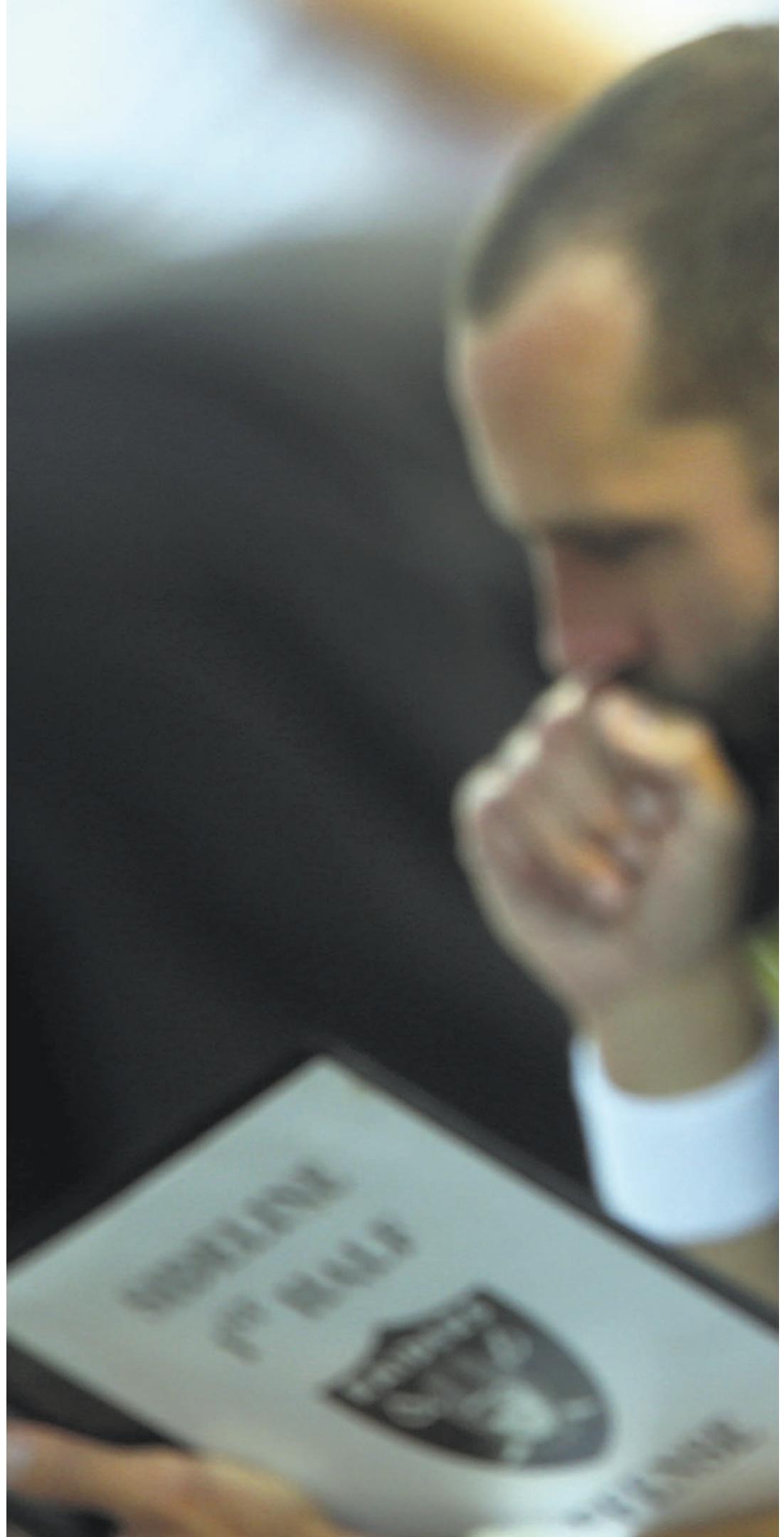
If Carr is doing something football-related, he's doing it with Gruden next to him. In an offensive meeting. In the quarterbacks room. If Carr isn't in a practice drill, he's standing next to Gruden while they pick each others' brains.

Carr estimates the Raiders log the most reps on a daily basis of any team in the NFL, and he doesn't think there will be a day he spends with Gruden over the next 10 years in which he doesn't learn something new from the head coach.

Asked how many hours per day he spends with Chucky, Carr chuckled.

"You know, the other night I was dreaming of him calling a play, so I'll just say 24 hours," he said. "We're always thinking of the next play, of the next call, of the next adjustment. I think he's brainwashed me a little bit. I guess I kind of feel like his quarterback robot a little bit."

Gruden has coached some





pretty decent quarterbacks during his time, namely Rich Gannon and Brad Johnson. He's also met countless others, whether they be in his QB Camp or production meetings before "Monday Night Football" games.

People questioned how coach and quarterback would mesh in Oakland, an in-your-face Gruden with the often-overly-respectful Carr. Well, it's fair to say they've squashed those questions, and it seems they couldn't get along any better.

Carr has the changed diet, the pliability, the mobility, the mental capacity, the surplus of Gruden influence and the skills. Now we get to see if that hefty package translates into results. Because if it doesn't, everything that's changed with the Raiders' starting quarterback in the past nine months won't matter.

If quarterback and head coach can deliver wins to back up their words, however, everything Carr has done in 2018 so far might just be the beginning of a story to remember.

"I can't say enough about him. He's special, that's all I'll say," Gruden said. "I've worked with a lot of really great quarterbacks in the past, but this guy is as into football as any guy I've met. He is talented and smart.

"If coach doesn't screw him up, we have a chance to have a heck of a quarterback."

Quarterback Derek Carr says he's "always thinking of the next play, of the next call, of the next adjustment. I think he's (Gruden) brainwashed me a little bit. I guess I kind of feel like his quarterback robot a little bit."

HE'S GOT THE DRIVE

WHILE OTHER COLLEGE KIDS ON FULL-RIDES TO MICHIGAN WERE GOOFING OFF ON THEIR SATURDAY NIGHTS, RAIDERS ROOKIE MO HURST WAS MAKING UBER RUNS AND SOME EXTRA CASH. CAN HE HELP STEER THIS DEFENSIVE LINE TO IMMEDIATE IMPROVEMENT?

BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN

Maurice “Mo” Hurst would have been a first-round draft pick if his evaluation had been based on talent alone. But a heart condition that caused him to leave the NFL Combine early dropped him to the fifth round in April.

Fully clear of that health scare, Hurst should assume a prominent role on the Raiders’ defensive line — an area they need as much help as they can get after a dismal 2017.

The Michigan product sat down with us to talk about his college Uber driving days, Michigan-Ohio State games, Michigan

Oakland Raiders defensive tackle Maurice Hurst drove an Uber in college to augment his scholarship.

alum and Raiders great Charles Woodson and more.

Any good stories about Jim Harbaugh?

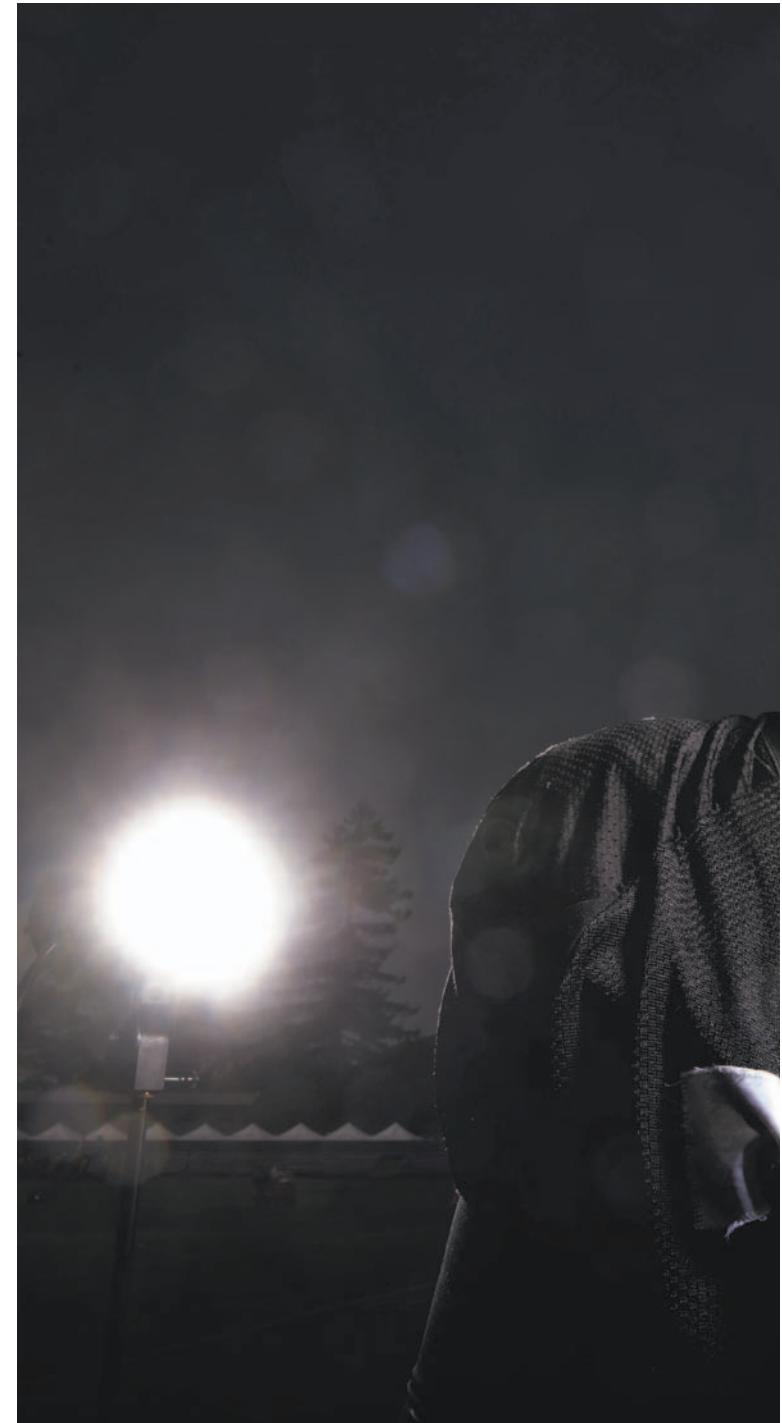
“He was real cool. He’s real nice. The guy just loves football. I think probably the hardest thing for us was just picking up the amount of football we did every day. He thought that to get better at football you had to play football a lot, so we did like four-hour spring practices. He always tried to get the most out of us and loved the player aspect of things. I don’t have any crazy stories like a

lot of other people.”

What’s it like running into the Big House for a Michigan-Ohio State game?

“It’s just a surreal moment. It just feels like a crazy atmosphere. In the locker room directly across from you, you can hear them yelling and screaming. You all congregate toward the middle before we go out on the field, and once you go out, it’s just a splash of maize and red. It’s like 115,000. I mean, it’s crazy. The two colors just splash so well and something that you can’t really describe with

DAI SUGANO — STAFF





words."

How about at Ohio State's stadium?

"It's a little bit louder than the Big House. It's just as great of an atmosphere. I mean, their fans are a little bit more flip-you-off. They have their little kids flipping you off and stuff. It's kind of crazy."

How'd you get into Uber driving while in Ann Arbor?

"It was kind of something that I needed a little extra money, just on top of my scholarship so I could pay for simple things like food and things that I enjoy."

Were you the guy on campus that everyone wanted as their driver?

"I'd like to think so. I hope so."

What times did you choose to drive?

"I'd normally do Saturday nights if I wasn't going out. It would be a lot of fun just to pick up people all over and talk to them. The funniest night I did was on Halloween, so I got to see a bunch dressed up in costumes, and all types of funny stuff happens on Halloween. It was a lot of

fun to do that. I actually ended up in a pothole because they're really bad. My night was cut short a little bit, but it was real fun."

What's your driver rating?

"4.98 or something. It's high."

Any consideration to still drive Uber while you're in the NFL?

"Yeah, I think so. I think I'll probably still do it."

Growing up in the Boston area, did your decision to go to Michigan have anything to do with Michigan alum Tom Brady?

"I think it had a lot to do actually with Brady, but Charles Woodson, too. He was such a great player, and I just remember playing NCAA Football. You get to play with all the old players and I just remember using Charles Woodson. It was such a great school. It had so many great players."

What has it been like having a Michigan great also be a Raiders great?

"It's awesome. I love it. It's great to just have someone else there that is a Michigan guy. We have Leon Hall, too, who's a Michigan great player. My D-line coach, Coach (Mike) Trgovac, he was a two-time All-Big Ten defensive lineman for Michigan, so it's just a great family and great connection to have."

Are you a big movie guy or Netflix?

"Probably more Netflix, I just watch so many shows. ... I just finished watching "How to Get Away With Murder." I've watched a little bit of "Scandal," "Power." I watched "Game of Thrones." That's been on for a little bit, though. Let's see, what else am I watching? I feel like I've watched so many shows."

How was leading the Michigan fight song at the San Francisco Michigan alumni event?

"That was awesome. That was great. There were probably like 100 people, probably just about, a lot of Michigan graduates. That was just out here, just an alumni event."

What is something that Raiders fans should know about you that they maybe don't on the surface?

"I don't know, just I'm a pretty easygoing person off the field. That's probably it."

Any plans to make side bets with Gareon Conley (Ohio State), Connor Cook, Shilique Calhoun (Michigan State) for Big Ten games?

"Oh yeah. We're gonna get after it this year."

Raiders plot lines

BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN



CAN JON GRUDEN BACK UP HIS FLARE WITH RESULTS?

I'm not sure more hype surrounds a single head coach in the NFL than Jon Gruden here in Oakland. He held a fan appreciation day in a small parking lot where over 500 Raiders fans showed, for crying out loud. There's no doubt the optimism around Chucky's return is there. But can he actually win?

WILL KHALIL MACK PLAY LIKE KHALIL MACK AFTER HOLDING OUT?

You can already hear the questions: "Khalil, no sacks through three games, are you still shaking off the rust from the holdout?" One of the league's best defenders will have to learn a new system (shouldn't be hard) and prove he's still the Khalil Mack of old despite missing significant time.

DEREK CARR BACK TO 2016 LEVEL AFTER SUBPAR 2017?

We know Derek Carr wasn't completely healthy after returning from three back fractures he suffered in Week 4. But a healthy No. 4, along with an offensive-minded head coach who challenges him mentally far more than Jack Del Rio, should do wonders for the Raiders' chances this season.

Oakland's Khalil Mack, one of the NFL's best defenders, will have to learn a new defensive system this season.

PHOTO BY EZRA SHAW — GETTY IMAGES

DEFENSE ANY BETTER AFTER PERSONNEL OVERHAUL?

Adding Bruce Irvin to the defensive line should help, and the linebacking corps seems stronger with Tahir Whitehead, veteran Derrick Johnson and a wiser Marquel Lee, among others. The question is the secondary: Can Gareon Conley stay healthy, and who else will start alongside Karl Joseph?

CAN KOLTON MILLER HOLD HIS OWN AT LEFT TACKLE?

At least for now, it looks like Kolton Miller will play a big role on this team. He held his own against Irvin in one-on-one pass-rushing drills during camp, but Arden Key spun right around the rookie left tackle a couple times. He had a solid preseason, and Donald Penn is suiting up at right tackle with the rookie on Carr's blindside.

SUBPLOTS FOR MONDAY MORNING QUARTERBACKS

When is the last time the Raiders had three wideouts with this much potential?

Do we have to go all the way back to the Rice-Brown-Porter days? This just might be the year Amari Cooper reaches elite status, Jordy Nelson's quarterback thinks he looks like a 20-something-year-old running around, and Martavis Bryant is an intriguing deep threat. And don't forget Ryan Switzer. Carr has a solid corps of options this season.

Bruce Irvin double-digit sacks?

The veteran linebacker-turned-defensive end has made it clear he wants at least 10 sacks for the first time in his career. Playing opposite Mack might free him up just enough to reach that goal.

Will Derrick Johnson show his age at MLB?

The oldest player on the team (he'll be 36 in November) needs to prove his legs are still young to anchor Oakland's defense. If they're not, a second-year middle linebacker in Marquel Lee is waiting in the wings. If they do, though, the Raiders will have a welcome treat on their hands.

Schedule at a glance

BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN

SEPT. 10

vs. Los Angeles Rams (7:20 p.m., ESPN)

The Rams are one of the favorites to win the Super Bowl. The Raiders ... are not. This is a solid measuring stick to open the year, as well as a competition to see which premier defensive lineman can shake off his holdout rust the best (if they're on the field).

SEPT. 16

at Denver (1:25 p.m., CBS)

The must-watch in this game is the punts, where Marquette King will face his old team. Bruce Irvin has tweeted his desire to play punt team (Psst: He doesn't like King). We can only hope it actually happens.

SEPT. 23

at Miami (10 a.m., CBS)

The Raiders pulled out a three-point win against the Dolphins in Miami last season. Miami has Ryan Tannehill back as its starting QB, and Kolton Miller might have to block Cameron Wake if Miller wins the starting LT job over Donald Penn.

SEPT. 30

vs. Cleveland (1:05 p.m., FOX)

There might not be a team that looks as different as the Browns this season. Will top pick Baker Mayfield be starting by Week 4? Who knows, but one certainty is that the Browns are better than last year with Jarvis Landry leading the new crop in Cleveland.

BIGGEST GAMES

Sept. 10 vs. Rams

The battle of the holdouts. Will Aaron Donald or Khalil Mack play? Neither or both?

Oct. 14 vs. Seahawks

Those who have been with both teams: Marshawn Lynch, Tom Cable, Ken Norton Jr., Breno Giacomin. And it's in London.

Nov. 1 at 49ers

The Battle of the Bay. It's Derek Carr vs. Jimmy G.

Dec. 9 vs. Steelers

The best wide receiver and the best running back come into Oakland for

what could be a pivotal Week 14 matchup.

Dec. 30 at Chiefs

It's anyone's guess what enticing playoff implications this one might have in Derrick Johnson's return to KC.

OCT. 7

at Los Angeles Chargers (1:05 p.m., CBS)

The Chargers beat the Raiders twice last season and are hot favorites to win the division. That is, if the cruel injury bug doesn't continue to strike in Carson. Philip Rivers continues to show few signs of aging.

OCT. 14

vs. Seattle, in London (10 a.m., FOX)

The Seahawks and Raiders meet across the pond, with former Seahawks Marshawn Lynch and Tom Cable opposing former Raiders DC and current Seattle DC Ken Norton Jr.

OCT. 21

BYE

OCT. 28

vs. Indianapolis (1:05 p.m., CBS)

Will Andrew Luck still have a right arm by October? Let's hope so, because this could be an interesting matchup. Former Colt Rashaan Melvin is now with the Raiders, and Oakland RBs coach Jemal Singleton came from Indy.

NOV. 1

at San Francisco (5:20 p.m., FOX)

Thursday Night Football between two Bay Area foes entering 2018 with plenty of hype. Jimmy G vs Jonny G. This one should be exciting. Levi's will be packed, but will there be more silver-and-black or red-and-gold?

NOV. 11

vs. Los Angeles Chargers (1:05 p.m., FOX)

Game 2 between the division foes only 11 weeks in, and both teams will likely be in the hunt. We'll see if Oakland's tackles are groomed enough at this point to withstand the ferocious rush of Joey Bosa and Melvin Ingram.

NOV. 18

at Arizona (1:05 p.m., CBS)

The Cardinals brought two new quarterbacks and a new head coach into the building. Josh Rosen could be starting for Arizona, facing a team with his college left tackle (Kolton Miller) at left tackle for the Raiders.

NOV. 25

at Baltimore (10 a.m., CBS)

Michael Crabtree faces his former team in a post-Thanksgiving bout on the East Coast. Might 2017 Heisman winner Lamar Jackson be starting for the Ravens? That would present a more mobile threat for the Raiders' defense to counteract.

DEC. 2

vs. Kansas City (1:05 p.m., CBS)

The first of two matchups between the division rivals comes late in the season. Patrick Mahomes replaces Alex Smith as the Chiefs' QB, and time will tell if he can slice and dice the silver and black as Smith did last season.

DEC. 9

vs. Pittsburgh (5:20 p.m., NBC)

This could be a big one in the AFC playoff picture. The best wide receiver and running back in the NFL strut into town, with former Steeler Martavis Bryant now a Raider. Could the Raiders' defense surprise everyone and be up to the task of containing one of the league's most explosive offenses?

DEC. 16

at Cincinnati (10 a.m., CBS)

A trip to the old stomping grounds of defensive coordinator Paul Guenther, cornerback Leon Hall, safety Reggie Nelson and linebacker Emmanuel Lamur. If I were a betting man, I'd say it'll be mildly chilly in Cincy this weekend.

DEC. 24

vs. Denver (5:15 p.m., ESPN)

The first of two division battles to end the regular season could carry significant playoff implications. Case Keenum and Denver stroll into Oakland, where Chaingate Part 2 erupted on the Coliseum sidelines early in last year's game between these two.

DEC. 30

at Kansas City (10 a.m., CBS)

The Raiders laid an egg in Kansas City last season, and this one might come with nothing at stake for the silver and black. If there are still postseason implications for Gruden and Co. though, there's no better place to silence a crowd if you're the Raiders than at Arrowhead.

Players to watch

BY MATT SCHNEIDMAN



PLAYERS WITH BREAKOUT POTENTIAL

Martavis Bryant

Bryant was suspended for all of 2016, then asked for a trade last season when he didn't get the ball enough in a Steelers offense that included Antonio Brown and Le'Veon Bell. A move to Oakland might be the fresh start he desperately needs.

Ryan Switzer

Derek Carr loves this guy. He'll primarily play the slot, and he'll also factor heavily in the return game. Don't be surprised if he reels off a long touchdown on a short slant route or a couple of return touchdowns.

Nicholas Morrow

The 2017 undrafted rookie was the best in Oakland's rookie class a season ago. He's in a battle with Emmanuel Lamur to start in the linebacking corps, and Gruden is sky high on him. Morrow flew well under the radar a year ago, but don't expect that to be the case in 2018.

Oakland's Marshawn Lynch, above, came on strong at the end of last season. At 32, does he have a lot left in the tank?

OTHER KEY PLAYERS

Rashaan Melvin

Melvin's breakout year came with the Colts last season, and the veteran might take on No. 1 corner duties in Oakland if Gareon Conley doesn't live up to his first-round billing.

Gareon Conley

Speaking of Conley, one of this year's main storylines will be whether the Raiders' 2017 first-rounder can actually stay healthy and play more than two games.

Marshawn Lynch

At 32, how much does Lynch have left in the tank? If the second half of last season is any indication, the answer is plenty.

Amari Cooper

After an injury-plagued 2017, Cooper returns as the focal point of Gruden's offense. With a rejuvenated Carr, this might just be the year Cooper makes the leap into the next echelon of NFL wide receivers.

ON THE HOT SEAT

Mario Edwards Jr.

He's always injured, and even when he's not, it's a struggle to produce. Maybe a position change will ignite a fire under Edwards once and for all. The Raiders certainly wouldn't mind it, especially at defensive tackle.

Donald Penn

Can Penn stay healthy and return to Pro Bowl status in his new position on the right side of the offensive line? If not, the Raiders have a bevy of options behind him.

Obi Melifonwu

Remember when Melifonwu was supposed to be the uber-athletic Swiss army knife for Jack Del Rio? Yeah, me too. He has the deck stacked against him when it comes to seeing significant time at safety this year.

POSITIONS OF CONCERN

Safety

Karl Joseph seems to be the only bona fide starter, and even he's nothing special. Reggie Nelson is 34 and slow(er), Marcus Gilchrist may be more of a slot guy, and Melifonwu is ... who knows with Obi Melifonwu. Do I dare say Erik Harris might start?

Defensive tackle

There's a reason the Raiders used two draft picks on this position. P.J. Hall and Maurice Hurst will be counted on, but it's also up to Justin Ellis and Mario Edwards Jr. to show they still have something in the tank.

Linebacker

Jon Gruden is high on youngsters Nicholas Morrow and Marquel Lee, but it'll be up to veterans Tahir Whitehead, Emmanuel Lamur and Derrick Johnson to make sure this unit runs like a well-oiled machine. Lamur has never been a full-time starter, and Johnson is 35, so we'll see how reliable they can be to lead the group. Whitehead seems like a sturdy option, for whatever that's worth.

How the roster was shaping up

Final rosters are always fluid until the real games begin, but the Raiders are even harder to predict given that Jon Gruden is keeping things close to the vest and Khalil Mack's status is still in limbo (at least when this magazine went to press). Things will have become more clear by the time you pick this up, but here's how the uncertain roster was unfolding.

No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.
QUARTERBACKS			
Locks			
4	Derek Carr	6-3	215
Bubble			
3	EJ Manuel	6-4	237
18	Connor Cook	6-4	217
RUNNING BACKS			
Locks			
24	Marshawn Lynch	5-11	215
28	Doug Martin	5-9	223
Bubble			
30	Jalen Richard	5-8	205
33	DeAndre Washington	5-8	205
34	Chris Warren III	6-2	246
FULLBACK			
Locks			
41	Keith Smith	6-0	240
WIDE RECEIVERS			
Locks			
89	Amari Cooper	6-1	211
82	Jordy Nelson	6-3	217
12	Martavis Bryant	6-4	210
15	Ryan Switzer	5-8	185
Bubble			
10	Seth Roberts	6-2	195
13	Griff Whalen	5-11	190
16	Johnny Holton	6-1	190
88	Marcell Ateman	6-4	216
TIGHT ENDS			
Locks			
87	Jared Cook	6-5	254
86	Lee Smith	6-6	265
85	Derek Carrier	6-4	244
OFFENSIVE LINE			
Locks			
77	Kolton Miller	6-8	309
70	Kelechi Osemele	6-5	330
61	Rodney Hudson	6-2	300
66	Gabe Jackson	6-3	335
72	Donald Penn	6-4	315
67	Ian Silberman	6-5	305
75	Brandon Parker	6-8	305
76	Jon Feliciano	6-4	325
Bubble			
71	David Sharpe	6-6	343
79	Denver Kirkland	6-5	335

No.	Name	Ht.	Wt.
DEFENSIVE LINE			
Locks			
52	Khalil Mack	6-3	252
51	Bruce Irvin	6-3	250
97	Mario Edwards Jr.	6-3	280
78	Justin Ellis	6-2	334
99	Arden Key	6-5	238
92	P.J. Hall	6-1	308
73	Maurice Hurst	6-2	291
96	Tank Carradine	6-4	270
Bubble			
90	Treyvon Hester	6-2	304
91	Shilique Calhoun	6-4	250
95	Fadol Brown	6-4	282
LINEBACKERS			
Locks			
59	Tahir Whitehead	6-2	241
55	Marquel Lee	6-3	235
54	Emmanuel Lamur	6-4	245
50	Nicholas Morrow	6-0	224
Bubble			
46	Jason Cabinda	6-1	243
47	James Cowser	6-3	245
56	Derrick Johnson	6-3	242
58	Kyle Wilber	6-4	245
CORNERBACK			
Locks			
21	Gareon Conley	6-0	195
22	Rashaan Melvin	6-2	196
36	Daryl Worley	6-1	205
29	Leon Hall	5-11	195
38	Nick Nelson	5-1	200
Bubble			
32	Antonio Hamilton	6-0	190
35	Shareece Wright	5-11	184
SAFETY			
Locks			
42	Karl Joseph	5-10	205
27	Reggie Nelson	5-11	210
31	Marcus Gilchrist	5-10	200
25	Erik Harris	6-3	225
Bubble			
20	Obi Melifonwu	6-3	224
SPECIAL TEAMS			
Locks			
5	Johnny Townsend	6-1	210
9	Eddy Piñeiro	6-0	185
48	Andrew DePaola	6-2	230
ACTIVE/PUP			
94	Eddie Vanderdoes	6-4	305

Who will stand atop the AFC West standings?

1. DENVER BRONCOS

(Last year, 5-11, fourth place)

Goodbye Trevor Siemian and Paxton Lynch, hello Case Keenum. That's the clear difference for a team that plunged to the AFC West cellar because of its subpar quarterback play in 2017. Now it has a QB, and Bradley Chubb, to complement Von Miller.

2. OAKLAND RAIDERS

(Last year, 6-10, third place)

3. LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

(Last year, 9-7, second place)

We're not buying into the Chargers hype. Sure, they have Keenan Allen, Melvin Gordon and Casey Hayward. But Philip Rivers will never get his team over the hump, and the injury bug will probably strike at a terrible time again.

4. KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

(Last year, 10-6, first place)

Patrick Mahomes will have a rough second year in the NFL as a first-time starter replacing Alex Smith. The Chiefs also lost two of their best defensive players in Derrick Johnson and Marcus Peters. Maybe I'm an outlier, but I expect the Chiefs to take a couple of steps back in 2018.

THE RAIDERS

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AFC power rankings

BY JERRY MCDONALD

1. NEW ENGLAND

Last season's record: 13-3

Maybe we should have seen the end coming against the Eagles after the New England defense was 29th in yards allowed but fifth in points allowed. Ten starters return from that defense. Get a good team in position to score often enough, and it's trouble. Still, Bill Belichick and Tom Brady remain atop the AFC until they are unseated.

2. PITTSBURGH

Last season's record: 13-3

As long as the triplets (Ben Roethlisberger, Le'Veon Bell, Antonio Brown) are in the mix, the Steelers should be in the playoffs. Pittsburgh is mostly playing a pat hand, with 10 offensive starters and nine defensive starters returning. The Steelers can take charge early as five of their first eight games are within the division.

3. KANSAS CITY

Last season's record: 10-6

Another year, another first-round playoff exit. And now, another quarterback in Patrick Mahomes, who has a big arm and a gambler's mentality after the measured, moderate approach from Alex Smith. If Kareem Hunt and Tyreek Hill remain legitimate game-breakers, Mahomes could flourish immediately. Defensively, the Chiefs need a return to form from edge rusher Justin Houston.

4. JACKSONVILLE

Last season's record: 10-6

The Jaguars can be had against the run on occasion, but last season was the epitome of a fast, sideline-to-sideline modern NFL defense. Jacksonville can get after the passer and cover receivers, and there's no reason that should change. Whether Blake Bortles is the quarterback to win a playoff game is another matter. Leonard Fournette offers Bortles decent down-and-distance.





5. L.A. CHARGERS

Last season's record: 9-7

Typical Chargers, they already lost promising tight end Hunter Henry to injury. But it was not typical the way Los Angeles played down the stretch to finish the season with a winning record. Quarterback Philip Rivers can still spray the ball all over the field. The Chargers were poor against the run, but Joey Bosa and Melvin Ingram are top outside rushers.

6. TENNESSEE

Last season's record: 9-7

A wild-card win over the Chiefs wasn't enough to save Mike Mularkey, who was replaced by Mike Vrabel. Vrabel will surely look to Belichickian philosophies, given his background as a Patriots player. Tennessee is strong against the run, susceptible to the pass, and it remains to be seen if Marcus Mariota will ever be consistent enough as a pure passer to be an elite quarterback.

7. BALTIMORE

Last season's record: 9-7

Joe Flacco has been pretty much a horizontal passer since being a Super Bowl champion, averaging 5.7 yards per attempt last year. We'll see how creative offensive coordinator Marty Mornhinweg is at working in Lamar Jackson, a first-round pick who at the least could provide a run-pass option to spice up the offense. All starters return from a solid defense that ranked sixth in fewest points allowed.

8. RAIDERS

Last season's record: 6-10

Early indications are the Raiders will be a much more organized and prepared team on both sides of the ball. If the crash course in Jon Gruden football gets Derek Carr back on track immediately, the Raiders could return to the playoffs. Defensively, much rests with an improved all-around pass rush and whether the new cornerbacks can cover.

New England's Tom Brady and Rob Gronkowski, left, fell just short in Super Bowl LII against the Eagles. Still, the duo along with coach Bill Belichick remain atop the AFC until they are unseated.

PHOTO BY ELSA/GETTY IMAGES

9. DENVER

Last season's record: 5-11

John Elway is gambling that Case Keenum is not a one-year wonder and can get the Broncos in the end zone often enough for a still formidable defense to do the rest. If Devontae Booker can become a lead runner, it helps. Ten starters return on defense minus Aqib Talib, including Hall of Fame-caliber outside linebacker Von Miller.

10. INDIANAPOLIS

Last season's record: 4-12

Everything hinges on Andrew Luck's throwing arm and putting a team around him that can help him stay healthy. A common sense start — taking Notre Dame guard Quenton Nelson in the first round to upgrade the offensive line. Frank Reich is a quarterback-centric first-year head coach, but there is still much work to be done.

11. CINCINNATI

Last season's record: 7-9

No sense in worrying about a hot seat when it comes to Bengals coach Marvin Lewis. The man turns out competitive but undisciplined teams year after year that occasionally make the playoffs and then lose, and that's good enough for owner Brown. More of the same this season as quarterback Andy Dalton remains above average, wide receiver A.J. Green is a dangerous target, and the Bengals will have their usual strong defensive front.

12. BUFFALO

Last season's record: 9-7

The Bills wanted to upgrade at quarterback, and their solution was to sign AJ McCarron, who has the look of a career backup, and first-round pick Josh Allen, who has a big arm but was a polarizing prospect in the eyes of NFL scouts. The defense gave too much ground against the run and signed Star Lotulelei to plug the gap, but nine starters return from the No. 26 unit in the NFL.

13. HOUSTON

Last season's record: 4-12

Deshawn Watson surpassed all expectations as a rookie quarterback before being injured, and then the Texans also lost J.J. Watt (again) to a broken leg. If Watson is as good as he looked, and Watt is truly healthy, those two players alone get this team to the realm of .500. Of course, neither player is a lock to do that. Having a worthy lead runner (Lamar Miller averaged 3.7 per carry) would do Watson a world of good.

14. MIAMI

Last season's record: 6-10

Pulling Jay Cutler off the couch a year ago didn't cut it, so coach Adam Gase can only hope the progress Ryan Tannehill seemed to make two years ago can carry on. The Dolphins parted with Ndamukong Suh, brought in ancient Frank Gore to upgrade the 29th-ranked rushing attack, and there's little in their off-season to suggest anything other than double-digit losses.

15. N.Y. JETS

Last season's record: 5-11

In Josh McCown, the Jets have a quarterback with the perfect temperament to step aside when first-round pick Sam Darnold is ready. That probably won't be long, given how the Jets will struggle. The Jets were actually OK at home last season, finishing 4-4, but a 1-7 disaster on the road. A win against the Patriots, to whom they've lost 12 of the last 14, would do wonders.

16. CLEVELAND

Last season's record: 0-16

Strange that an 0-16 season seemed almost under-the-radar, probably because the Browns have been bad for so long that it didn't surprise anybody. Hue Jackson gives it another go, this time with John Dorsey as his general manager. Dorsey promptly selected Baker Mayfield at No. 1, and Mayfield could go either way. Bad news for Mayfield — Browns wideouts scored seven touchdowns.

NFC power rankings

BY JERRY MCDONALD

1. PHILADELPHIA

Last season's record: 13-3

There hasn't been a repeat Super Bowl champion in 14 years. Coincidentally, the NFC East hasn't had a repeat champion in 14 years, either. Winning a championship while undergoing a late-season quarterback change speaks to the quality of the roster and the level of coaching. Bottom line: If you finish at No. 1, you start here the following year.

2. L.A. RAMS

Last season's record: 11-5

The NFL's surprise team in 2017 is out to prove it's not a one-year wonder and went all in with the defensive acquisitions of Ndamukong Suh, Marcus Peters and Aqib Talib. In theory, they'll be joined by defensive player of the year (and holdout) Aaron Donald. Coach Sean McVay put in a system that made Jared Goff an instant success after a difficult rookie year and revived running back Todd Gurley.

3. MINNESOTA

Last season's record: 13-3

Kirk Cousins takes over for Case Keenum, who came out of nowhere to lead the Vikings to an unexpected division title. But where Minnesota is concerned, it's all about defense under Mike Zimmer after having finished first in total defense, second in passing defense and first in fewest points allowed. Most everyone returns from that unit. The Vikings will need to recover from the 38-7 gut punch loss to Philly in the NFC title game.

4. GREEN BAY

Last season's record: 7-9

Will go as far as the right arm of Aaron Rodgers can carry them. Joe Philbin returns as offensive coordinator, and the Packers were very good under his watch from 2007-11. Free-agent signing Jimmy Graham could be at his explosive best with Rodgers. Mike Pettine arrives as defensive coordinator for a team that had gradually regressed each year under defensive coordinator Dom Capers.





5. ATLANTA

Last season's record: 10-6

The Falcons felt the loss of offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan early on, but Steve Sarkisian seemed to hit his stride as Atlanta made it back to the playoffs with Matt Ryan passing for 4,095 yards. The offense should remain explosive. Ten defensive starters return from an active, wide-ranging unit led by middle linebacker Deion Jones.

6. CAROLINA

Last season's record: 11-5

The Panthers simply can't continue with Cam Newton (139 carries, 754 yards) as their leading rusher despite their record last season. Getting Christian McCaffrey on track as a ball carrier would help. Defensive losses from the NFL's seventh-ranked unit (third against the run) included defensive tackle Star Lotuleilei, end Charles Johnson and cornerback Daryl Worley.

7. NEW ORLEANS

Last season's record: 11-5

The ability of coach Sean Payton to balance the offense with the running of Mark Ingram and Alvin Kamara did wonders for quarterback Drew Brees, whose 536 passing attempts were his fewest for a 16-game season since he played for the Chargers. The defense under Dennis Allen was much better as well, and in the off-season the Saints added cornerback Patrick Robinson from the Eagles.

8. SEATTLE

Last season's record: 9-7

The Seahawks don't play defense like they used to and are putting way too much on the right arm and legs of quarterback Russell Wilson (34 TD passes, team-leading 586 yards rushing). Seattle needs first-round pick Rashaad Penny to give the running game some juice and protect Wilson. Ken Norton Jr. was an in-season firing by the Raiders because their defense was so poor. Now he's running Seattle's defense under Pete Carroll.

Rams coach Sean McVay put in a system that made quarterback Jared Goff, left, an instant success after a difficult rookie year.

PHOTO BY SEAN M. HAFFEY — GETTY IMAGES

9. DALLAS

Last season's record: 9-7

A six-game suspension to Ezekiel Elliott hurt the Cowboys. Quarterback Dak Prescott wasn't the same without him and didn't play as well as he did as a rookie even when Elliott returned. Guard Connor Williams adds another top offensive lineman, but nine starters return from a mediocre defense. A huge year from end DeMarcus Lawrence (he had 14.5 sacks) would help immensely.

10. ARIZONA

Last season's record: 8-8

Steve Wilks takes over for Bruce Arians, and it remains to be seen if the offensive creativity under Arians is out the window. It's complicated from the get-go, with Sam Bradford and first-round draft pick Josh Rosen at quarterback, replacing the retired Carson Palmer. A bounce-back year from David Johnson is crucial. Lots of defensive turnover.

11. 49ERS

Last season's record: 6-10

Went from hopeless to hopeful in the first year of coach Kyle Shanahan and general manager John Lynch after the arrival of quarterback Jimmy Garoppolo from New England. If Garoppolo really is Tom Brady reincarnated, it's a potential playoff team. The 49ers are counting on Richard Sherman's repaired Achilles to allow the defender to impart a Seattle swagger to the defense. A more grounded Reuben Foster would mean a lot.

12. DETROIT

Last season's record: 9-7

Will the Lions ever give quarterback Matt Stafford some help? Coach Matt Patricia arrives from New England, where the Patriots have managed to run the ball effectively enough to help get the best out of Tom Brady despite a constantly changing supporting cast. Detroit's top defensive free-agent signing, Devon Kennard, came from the Giants, who couldn't stop anybody. Uh, oh.

13. WASHINGTON

Last season's record: 7-9

Alex Smith showed he could strike downfield with Kansas City when he had the targets outside. He doesn't have them in Washington, so he'll be back to being an effective "game manager." That's a tough task when your defense ranked rock bottom in the NFL in rushing defense and did little to upgrade that issue in terms of personnel.

14. TAMPA BAY

Last season's record: 5-11

For an offensive-minded coach, Dirk Koetter sure didn't seem to exploit Mike Evans (five touchdowns) in the red zone despite being a mismatch. Evans and DeSean Jackson figured to be an explosive duo for Jameis Winston, but it never materialized. A defense that had only 22 sacks added five new faces to go along with Gerald McCoy up front.

15. N.Y. GIANTS

Last season's record: 3-13

The Giants under new coach Pat Shurmur doubled down on starting quarterback Eli Manning, who could find his game revitalized now that he's got No. 2 overall pick Saquon Barkley to shoulder much of the load. The problem is a truly awful defense that dumped five starters but appeared to tread water in terms of quality personnel.

16. CHICAGO

Last season's record: 5-11

Matt Nagy, who ran the Chiefs offense last season, takes over as head coach and is tasked with getting 2017 first-round pick Mitchell Trubisky up to that standard and turn around the NFL's No. 32-ranked passing attack. Nagy was wise to retain Vic Fangio, whose defense ranked 10th despite not having many big names or stars. But there's a long way to go.

Faces in new places

BY JERRY MCDONALD

CASE KEENUM
QB, Denver

Considered by most a career backup, Keenum saved Minnesota's season with 11-3 starting record, throwing 22 touchdown passes with seven interceptions. When the Vikings went with Kirk Cousins, the Broncos signed Keenum in hopes of a Rich Gannon-like ascension from journeyman to indispensable leader.

MICHAEL CRABTREE
WR, Baltimore

Even though drop-prone, Crabtree was pretty much a model practice player and teammate with the Raiders after coming in with a questionable reputation from the 49ers. The relationship soured last season, and Crabtree was let go in favor of Jordy Nelson. The Ravens would be thrilled with the 2015-2016 version of Crabtree.

SAMMY WATKINS
WR, Kansas City

Watkins has been inconsistent and merely OK for both Buffalo and the Los Angeles Rams, with both teams opting to move on. The Chiefs' stepping in with a three-year, \$48 million deal for a receiver with 25 touchdowns in four seasons is a head-scratcher.

JIMMY GRAHAM
TE, Green Bay

Never a system fit in Seattle the way he was in New Orleans, the hope in Green Bay is teaming with Aaron Rodgers will return Graham to form. In his last season with Drew Brees at quarterback, Graham caught 86 passes for 1,215 yards and 16 touchdowns in 2013.

NDAMUKONG SUH
DT, L.A. Rams

There's been a long-running debate whether Suh was ever really worth all the money the Dolphins paid him as a 2014 free agent. The Rams rented him for a year at the price of \$14 million to team him with Aaron Donald inside. Oh, and they also got cornerbacks



The Denver Broncos have a new quarterback in Case Keenum, who is a hit with fans at training camp. Will he be a hit when he takes the field?

Marcus Peters by trade and Aqib Talib in free agency.

NATE SOLDER
LT, N.Y. Giants

The former New England Patriots left tackle will now protect the blind side of Eli Manning instead of Tom Brady after signing a four-year, \$62 million deal. Solder was solid for the Patriots, but you wonder about this one. The Patriots seldom move on from a player without a good reason.

TYRANN MATHIEU
S, Houston

If Mathieu is truly healthy, he gives the Texans

a back-end player on a defense that already has front-seven forces J.J. Watt, Jadaeion Clowney and Whitney Mercilus, the Texans could be truly formidable defensively. But given the physical issues all four players have faced, that could be a long shot.

TRUMAINE JOHNSON
CB, N.Y. Jets

Signed to franchise tags in back-to-back years by the Rams, which earned him more than \$30 million, the Rams let him walk this time. Johnson cashed in with a five-year, \$72 million deal. A decent player, but he's got 18 interceptions in six seasons and has yet to make the Pro Bowl.

MALCOLM BUTLER
CB, Tennessee

Maybe we'll never know why Butler was left out of the Super Bowl by Bill Belichick in a game where they clearly needed help in the secondary against a red-hot Nick Foles. The fascinating thing is he was signed to a five-year, \$61.25 million deal by the Titans who are coached by Mike Vrabel, a Belichick disciple.

MARQUETTE KING
P, Denver

A flamboyant punter who couldn't stay off social media, King was extremely productive (and overpaid) with the Raiders. King may not be everybody's cup of tea, but there's no denying his ability to kick it far and deep. Now he's got eight games in the mile high altitude and two games against the Raiders.

Milestone marker

BY JERRY MCDONALD



Drew Brees of the Saints, top, needs 1,496 yards passing to become the most prolific passer ever. Adam Vinatieri of the Colts, above, is 58 points from being the NFL's all-time leading scorer. Baltimore's Terrell Suggs, right, can move from 17th to 11th on the all-time list of sacks leaders.



PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

DYNAMIC DUO

▪ Drew Brees of the Saints and Tom Brady of the Patriots each have 488 touchdown passes, and both are within range this season of the 508 TD passes for Brett Favre. If each plays two more seasons at peak efficiency, the all-time record of 539 set by Peyton Manning is within reach in 2019.

PROLIFIC PASSING

▪ Brees needs 1,496 yards passing to pass Favre (71,838) and Manning (71,940) and become the most prolific passer in terms of yardage in NFL history.

A KICK ABOVE

▪ Adam Vinatieri of the Colts needs 58 points this season to pass Morten Andersen (2,544 points) and become the leading scorer in the history of the NFL.

RUNNING AWAY WITH IT

▪ With 76 yards rushing, Miami running back Frank Gore passes Curtis Martin (14,101 yards) and trails only Emmitt Smith (18,355), Walter Payton (16,726) and Barry Sanders (15,269) on the NFL's all-time rushing list.

PASSING A HALL OF FAMER?

▪ With 390 yards receiving, Larry Fitzgerald of the Cardinals moves past Terrell Owens (15,934 yards) and into second place on the all-time yardage receiving list, trailing only Jerry Rice (22,895).

SUGGS THE SACK ARTIST

▪ With a 10.5-sack season, Baltimore's Terrell Suggs (125.5 sacks) would move from 17th to 11th on the NFL's all-time list of sacks leaders. Among the players he would pass are Derrick Thomas (126.5) and Lawrence Taylor (132.5). The NFL began counting sacks as an official stat in 1982.

HANG TIME

▪ With 2,536 yards punting, Houston punter Shane Lechler (68,676) would pass Jeff Feagles (71,211 yards) for the most gross punting yards in the history of the NFL. Lechler has had fewer than 2,536 yards only once in 18 seasons.

Rookie watch

BY JERRY MCDONALD

SAQUON BARKLEY**RB New York Giants**

Here's your odds-on favorite for Offensive Rookie of the Year. Could be an instant smash success out of Penn State after being the No. 2 overall pick. Don't be surprised if he approaches 1,400 yards and helps the Giants go from 3-13 to somewhere near .500.

BRADLEY CHUBB**DE Denver Broncos**

Just what the Broncos needed, another pass rusher to go along with Von Miller. Still to be determined whether he's an outside linebacker or defensive end at 275 pounds. Either way, Miller's presence could set up the No. 5 pick out of North Carolina State for a double-digit sack season. He's your favorite for Defensive Rookie of the Year.

RASHAAD PENNY**RB Seattle Seahawks**

Penny, taken No. 27 in the first round out of San Diego State, comes to a team that has been desperate to find a lead runner since Marshawn Lynch left and is also looking to take some pressure off quarterback Russell Wilson. Penny will get plenty of chances to prove he's that player.

BAKER MAYFIELD**QB Cleveland Browns**

Let's face it. If Mayfield sits behind Tyrod Taylor for any length of time, he's been a disappointment. A team as bad as the Browns doesn't sit the first pick in the draft unless they've made a mistake. The Oklahoma product is a big-time boom or bust pick. He could be too small and not athletic enough or a quarterback savant that thrives immediately.

MIKE MCGLINCHY**RT 49ers**

McGlinchy has stepped in immediately at right tackle and seized the position. The No. 9 pick out of Notre Dame, McGlinchy looks good enough to provide right side protection for Jimmy Garoppolo and athletic enough to execute the stretch-and-cut runs that are the 49ers' bread and butter. Plus he's got Joe Staley to learn from.

DERWIN JAMES**S Los Angeles Chargers**

A wide-ranging player that Raiders fans were pining for to man the back end of the



Penn State's Saquon Barkley is the odds-on favorite for NFL's Offensive Rookie of the Year.

secondary. Instead, the Raiders took tackle Kolton Miller, and James fell to the Chargers. One thing to watch — James, who looks like a playmaker on some plays, vanished from the film on others, which caused some teams to shy away from him.

CALVIN RIDLEY**WR Atlanta Falcons**

Ridley performed at Alabama in much the same way that Amari Cooper did. He's smooth, explosive and appears prepared to contribute immediately at a position where rookies often struggle. Even better, Ridley joins a polished passing offense with a top-flight quarterback in Matt Ryan and a big-time receiver in fellow Alabama product Julio Jones on the other side.

Baker Mayfield is a big-time boom or bust pick. He could be too small and not athletic enough or a quarterback savant that thrives immediately.



PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN PETERSEN AND JOE ROBBINS — GETTY IMAGES

Must-see games

BY JERRY MCDONALD

SEPT. 10

L.A. Rams at Raiders

The second of two Monday night offerings has it all. Jon Gruden in his return after nine seasons vs. former protege Sean McVay, coach of one of last year's surprise teams. The new-and-improved Derek Carr vs. Jared Goff, who broke out a year ago. The Rams made a huge off-season splash with the additions of Ndamukong Suh, Aqib Talib and Marcus Peters on defense.

SEPT. 16

Kansas City at Pittsburgh

The Chiefs made an early exit from the playoffs last season by blowing a lead against Tennessee, the ramifications of which included a switch at quarterback from Alex Smith to Patrick Mahomes. For a team with a good track record of reaching the playoffs, Ben Roethlisberger hasn't delivered a championship in nine seasons. That's a long time in Steeltown, and the window is closing.

SEPT. 23

New Orleans at Atlanta

Entrenched in an NFC South that also includes Carolina, this game pits two of the most efficient quarterbacks in the NFL in Drew Brees and Matt Ryan. Brees has won a championship and wants another before riding off into the sunset. Ryan's legacy will forever be dominated by losing a 28-3 lead to New England in his lone Super Bowl appearance until he delivers a title — and this year's Super Bowl is in Atlanta.

SEPT. 30

Houston at Indianapolis

What could possibly be intriguing about two teams that combined for nine wins in 2017? Because by this time we should have an idea of whether the Texans' J.J. Watt and the Colts' Andrew Luck are hale, hearty and have retaken their place among the NFL's top players after battling serious injuries. If they are, Houston and Indianapolis can go from hopeless to hopeful.

DEC. 30

Raiders at Kansas City

49ers at L.A. Rams

The final paragraph in the storyline for Jon Gruden's first season back as Raiders head coach? Or does the reboot actually secure a postseason berth -- maybe even at home. Last year's Rams — 49ers finale was a dud because the Rams rested key players. The hope for 49ers fans this year is Jimmy Garoppolo putting the finishing touches on an MVP season.

OCT. 7

Minnesota at Philadelphia

The Vikings took it on the chin in last year's NFC championship game, with Nick Foles completing 26 of 33 passes for 352 yards and three touchdowns against what had been a very good defense. The quarterback figures to be Carson Wentz this time around, and the Vikings made a big investment in Kirk Cousins in hopes Mike Zimmer can be the first Minnesota coach since Bud Grant to reach the Super Bowl.

OCT. 14

Jacksonville at Dallas

The Jaguars gave mighty New England a go of it before losing 24-20 in the AFC championship game. Their game plan? Try and get Blake Bortles to play efficiently with the help of running back Leonard Fournette to allow their superior defense to dominate. The Cowboys will run Ezekiel Elliott directly into the heart of that defense in hopes of taking the pressure off Dak Prescott.

OCT. 21

L.A. Rams at 49ers

By this point, assuming Jimmy Garoppolo doesn't have the 49ers undefeated, their big test comes against the defending NFC West champions with Jared Goff and a star-studded defense. Yes, the 49ers won last year's regular-season finale 34-13, but it was a game in which Sean McVay was resting key players for the playoffs. No free pass this time around.

OCT. 28

Baltimore at Carolina

Will Joe Flacco still be at the reins, throwing short, shorter and shortest with a stagnant offense, or revert to his 2012 form and strike downfield? The Ravens will have determined whether Lamar Jackson is worth a series. The Panthers will contend, but it would behoove the offense to find someone other than Cam Newton to be the leading rusher.

NOV. 1

Raiders at 49ers

The last time the two franchises will face one another with both residing in the Bay Area unless something goes horribly wrong with stadium construction in Las Vegas. Kyle Shanahan, like the Rams' Sean McVay, worked under Gruden. Derek Carr was the talk of the Bay Area in 2016 and supplanted by Jimmy Garoppolo a year ago. Count on plenty of Raiders fans working their way into Levi's Stadium for a Thursday night game.

NOV. 11

New England at Tennessee

In Week 10, if form holds, the Patriots under Bill Belichick will have ho-hummed their way to a big lead in the NFC East with 41-year-old Tom Brady leading the way. The Titans took a page from the Patriots book with the hiring of Mike Vrabel as head coach. Vrabel was a core Patriot and should have some idea on what it takes to beat the team that taught him most of what he knows.

NOV. 15

Green Bay at Seattle

Like Raiders-49ers, it's another example of the NFL doing what it can to avoid presenting bad matchups in Thursday night games. Assuming Aaron Rodgers and Russell Wilson are both healthy and productive, it's a game between two teams that are a threat to win every week. And also two teams that are so reliant on their quarterback that they're also-rans without them.

NOV. 25

Pittsburgh at Denver

If all goes according to plan, the Broncos will be Mile High again largely because of their defense. If rookie Bradley Chubb is indeed a premier pass rusher on the side opposite Von Miller, Denver will have a combination similar to Miller-DeMarcus Ware championship at Levi's Stadium. The Steelers are always in contention around Thanksgiving, and it shouldn't be any different this season.

DEC. 2

Arizona at Green Bay

An educated guess suggests that Arizona quarterback Sam Bradford is either injured or will have surrendered his status as the first-string quarterback to first-round draft pick and UCLA product Josh Rosen. Nothing better to test the mettle of a born-and-bred California quarterback than a December date on the frozen tundra in a duel against Aaron Rodgers.

DEC. 9

Pittsburgh at Raiders

Does Jon Gruden have the Raiders in the postseason mix? If so, this Sunday night national telecast will give Raiders fans a chance to properly game plan in the Coliseum parking lot to be at their ghoulish best come kickoff against one of their traditional rivals. The cameras will be turned toward the stands nearly as much as on the field.

DEC. 13

L.A. Chargers at Kansas City

New England visits Pittsburgh a few days later, but this Thursday night game pits a Chargers team that was playing the best football in the division at this point a year ago against a Chiefs team that has either sunk or is swimming with Patrick Mahomes at quarterback. Coming at Mahomes is one of the NFL's best 1-2 combos from the outside, Joey Bosa and Melvin Ingram.

DEC. 23

Atlanta at Carolina

Could very well determine the champion of the NFC South and would pit a pair of former Most Valuable Players against each other with the Falcons' Matt Ryan and the Panthers' Cam Newton. We'll know if the Panthers have determined whether Christian McCaffrey is a viable traditional running back or gadget back and slot receiver.



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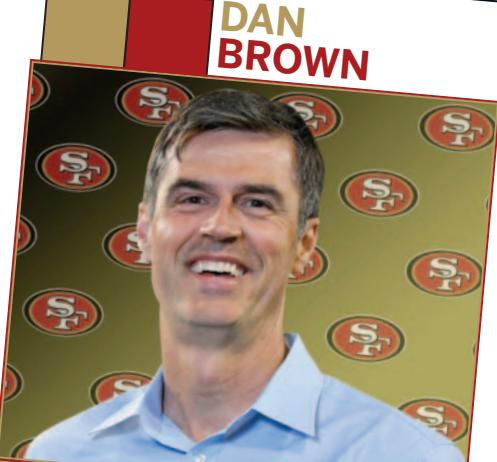
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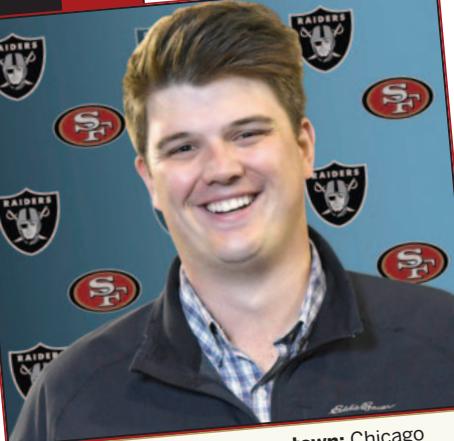
**DAN
BROWN**



HT: 6-4 WT: 190 Hometown: Cotati
Nickname: Taz
Favorite TD dance: Billy "White Shoes" Johnson's
Team he grew up hating: Prison guards in 'The Longest Yard'
All-time NFL hero: Barry Sanders
Favorite 49er: Roger Craig
Favorite Raider: Jim Plunkett
Super Bowl LIII: Patriots over Saints

@MercBrownie

**DIETER
KURTENBACH**



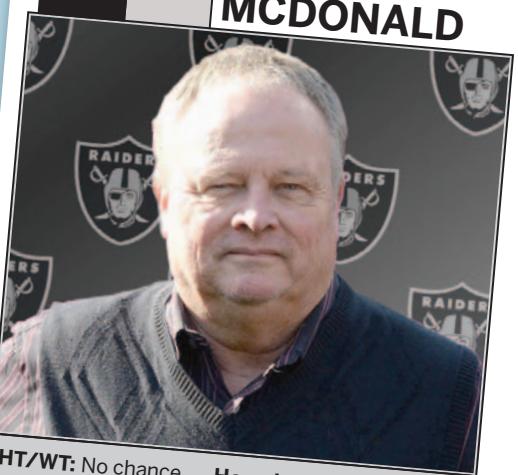
HT: 6-9 WT: 270 Hometown: Chicago
Nickname: Big Deets
Favorite TD dance: The Dirty Bird
Team he grew up hating: Broncos
All-time NFL hero: Randy Moss
Favorite 49er: Terrell Owens
Favorite Raider: Rich Gannon
Super Bowl LIII: Steelers over Saints

@dkurtenbach

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Sign up for 49ers here:
www.bayareane.ws/49ershq

**JERRY
MCDONALD**



HT/WT: No chance Hometown: Hayward
Nickname: Mac
Favorite TD dance: Dislike them all
Team he grew up hating: Equal opportunity hater
All-time NFL hero: Pat Tillman
Favorite 49er: Ronnie Lott
Favorite Raider: Charles Woodson
Super Bowl LIII: Steelers over Vikings

@Jerrymcd

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**MATT
SCHNEIDMAN**



HT: 6-1 WT: 165 Hometown: Wilton, CT
Nickname: The Professor
Favorite TD dance: Cam Newton's Superman
Team he grew up hating: Eagles
All-time NFL hero: David Tyree
Favorite 49er/Raider: TBD
Super Bowl LIII: Rams over Texans

@mattschneidman



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